Reasonable Moral Faith

A HISTORY, PRIMER, AND ARGUMENT

David Baggett
& William Lane Craig

“This book is an absolute treasure! Moral arguments have often been considered among the most vivid and compelling testimonies to the reality and nature of God, yet today their reception is surprisingly unpredictable. No one is better positioned to help this situation than David Baggett and William Lane Craig, who bring an amazing wealth of knowledge and experience to the topic. Their case is all the more powerful because they do not draw solely from the objectivity of moral values and duties but draw from other aspects of our moral experience, such as moral transformation, as well. No one interested in the relation of morality and God can afford to avoid this wise, balanced, well-crafted, and persuasive book!”

—**Gavin Ortlund**, president, Truth Unites; visiting professor, Phoenix Seminary; theologian-in-residence, Immanuel Nashville

“This book is a stunning achievement. The authors have done more than one would imagine one could in a single book: They have given a careful and informative history of moral arguments for God, provided a careful and charitable account of the contemporary debate about the issues, and developed a comprehensive, multipronged version of the argument, dealing along the way with a host of issues and alternative views. Of course, not every claim will be convincing to all readers, something the authors concede; I myself wish they had been kinder to the long tradition of Christian Platonism. However, *Reasonable Moral Faith* will be helpful to anyone who wants to think seriously about the relation of morality to God. It is a work to which I will often return and for which I am deeply grateful.”

—**C. Stephen Evans**, University Professor of Philosophy and Humanities, Baylor University

“*Reasonable Moral Faith* is a breathtaking achievement by the top two defenders of the moral argument for God’s existence in our day. Baggett and Craig’s book is a rich, incisive, and comprehensive treatment of the most powerful, multifaceted reason for belief in God. The argument from morality is not only rational; it is also profoundly personal and practical, ultimately pointing us to the triune God, who

through Christ graciously offers us forgiveness, redemption, and transformation. This argument reminds us that we need outside divine assistance to bridge the wide moral gap between the highest ethical standard rooted in God's good character and our own miserable failure to live up to it. Here in one volume, we finally have the most impressive case for God from morality, which will serve as the standard treatment for the next generation and beyond."

—**Paul Copan**, Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics, Palm Beach Atlantic University

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David Baggett
and William Lane Craig

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To Angus and Vicki Menuge,
with fondness

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Preface

We wish to spend a few moments expressing our heartfelt appreciation to Steve Evans and John Hare, whose passion for and long labor on the issues raised here are eminently laudable. Thanks to Houston Christian University for the chance for David to serve as the inaugural director of the Center for the Foundations of Ethics as well as for a course release it afforded him during the 2024–2025 school year, without which finishing the book on time would not have been practicable.

Much appreciation to the good folks at Baker Academic for believing in the project and making it possible: Robert Hosack, James Korsmo, and Anna English. Likewise to each student in David's delightful graduate class on the moral argument in the spring of 2025, who pored and puzzled over each page of the manuscript: Justice Aina-Jones, Ulises Baltazar, Zin-Dai Du, Carson Holloway, Sonia Kurian, James McQuillan, Darryl Smith, Matthew Smith, and Greg Thomas.

Thanks as well to our excellent agent, Steve Laube.

Since this book aims to encapsulate in short compass the field of moral apologetics, we use with permission portions from some previous publications. For example, "Moral Values and the Idea of God: The Apologetic Legacy of William Ritchie Sorley," *Christian Research Journal*, June 28, 2021, and "Might God Help Explain Moral Knowledge?," *Perichoresis* 21, no. 1 (2023): 4–21.

The book is designed to capture in broad strokes and in one volume most all the major themes concerning the moral argument. Much material is entirely new, whereas other ideas and arguments have gestated and marinated for some time, having gone through numerous iterations.

Introduction

I (Dave) remember as a child watching a television commercial about an organization that provided food for needy children around the world. An image haunts me to this day of a child in obvious physical need being handed food to eat. I can still recall how deeply moving it was, filling me with the visceral sense at the time that what I had just seen was something morally good. To feed that hungry child was beautiful; it was right and good. Obviously, it was tragic that the child was in so desperate a plight, but addressing the child's abject need in this way was deeply appropriate. Of that I was quite sure. In fact, I remember thinking that I was unlikely ever to experience anything that could make me seriously question the goodness or rightness of the action. What else could I be as sure of as this? That was what I thought then, and fifty years later, my conviction remains. Little did I know that this was one of my first thoughts as a budding philosopher and ethicist; in a real sense, this childhood experience set me on a trajectory that I still travel.

Other people share similar stories. A poignant example can be found in the great American abolitionist Frederick Douglass's memoir *My Bondage and My Freedom*. From the perspective of 1855, he tried to remember how as an innocent child he had encountered the "raw unfairness of the world and the essential venality of humankind": "There are thoughtful days in the lives of children—at least there were in mine—when they grapple with all the great, primary subjects of knowledge, and reach, in a moment, conclusions which no subsequent experience can shake. I was just as well aware of the unjust, unnatural, and murderous character of slavery, when nine years old, as I am now. Without any appeal to books, to laws, or to authorities of any kind, it was enough to accept God as a father, to regard slavery as a crime."[1]

Morality is ineliminably experiential. It is like aesthetics, the study of beauty, in this way. It is not enough merely to think about such topics in a passive manner, nor merely as an objective body of knowledge. In "Meditation in a Toolshed," C. S. Lewis once reflected on an experience he had contrasting two ways to experience a sunbeam making its way into a dark shed through a crack at the top of the door. One way is to look *at* it, noticing, perhaps, the floating particles of dust it illumines in an otherwise dark shed. The other way involves putting one's eye into the path of the light in order to look *along* the beam. When Lewis did so, here is what he saw: "Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences."[2]

This book is, most generally, about the topic of God and morality. More specifically, it is about a moral argument for God's existence. What we aim to do is not just to talk about the argument but instead to try to help readers feel its force. Not merely to look *at* the argument but to look *along* it. We do not intend merely to discuss the moral argument but rather to explain why we personally find it persuasive and compelling. We do not imagine that everyone reading will agree, and that is just fine. People need to think these issues through on their own and come to their own conclusions. Our claim is not that those who remain unpersuaded can resist the argument only on pain of contradiction, irrationality, or perversity. We instead simply aim to show why we find it to possess powerful force.

So this book is a rather concise essay or handy primer to introduce the moral argument for God, an exercise in discussing what it is about the argument that we find compelling and why. We endeavor to present the moral argument in a way that is persuasive, although of course we harbor no hopes that the argument will be found universally persuasive. After a rich history leading up to contemporary times, the argument has attracted quite a bit of attention in the last few decades, and we thought it a good time to consolidate its history and concisely encapsulate ways in which the argument can be presented. This gives us a chance to identify various proverbial forks in the road where those presenting the argument have options from which to choose, resulting in subtly different variants of the

argument. We will also have occasion to anticipate and answer various objections along the way. We aim for this book to be fairly accessible to a wider audience.

A moral argument attempts to infer God's existence (and perhaps some of his attributes) from moral evidence of various sorts. By "God" we mean nothing idiosyncratic but rather a supernatural being rather classically construed as possessing such great-making qualities as power, benevolence, goodness, and the like to the maximally compossible degree. This means there may be some built-in limitations; if God knows it is going to rain in Houston tomorrow, for example, he cannot simultaneously have that knowledge and make it not rain. This is less an intrinsic limitation on God than simply a function of God's attributes manifesting coherence. Presumably not even God can make logical contradictions true.[3]

Similarly, God's omnibenevolence, or all-goodness, would preclude his engaging in certain kinds of actions. If God's goodness is at all recognizable, attributing to him such a quality is to impute some determinate content; God's goodness is not consistent with just any and every behavior, no matter how morally questionable. Usually our discussion will involve the God of the philosophers, but on occasion we will delve into aspects of specifically Christian theology. We ourselves are Christians and think this reference to a distinctively Christian understanding of God justified; but when we do so, we will make it clear that this is happening.

We decided to write this book together because we have each done work on the moral argument individually, and we thought it would be a worthwhile project to pool our efforts and, to the extent that we can, integrate our approaches. In addition to laying out a moral argument incorporating elements of both of our versions, we will try to motivate the argument, explore some of its implications, discuss some of its historical variants, and anticipate and try to answer some notable objections.

As we get underway, it is worth noting that we think the argument works best in combination with other arguments of natural theology. Both of us are convinced that cumulative cases for God's existence are the most effective way to go. In this way, limitations of particular arguments may be rectified and augmented by other arguments included in the cumulative case. Nor do we aim to produce an argument whose conclusion must be accepted on pain of irrationality. We are not offering a definitive

demonstration of God's existence by any stretch but simply an argument with some evidential force that, especially when combined with other arguments, can provide rational justification for belief in God.

In 2014 a conference at Baylor University was held for the purpose of reading preliminary drafts of several chapters that would eventually make up a book edited by Trent Dougherty and Jerry Walls called *Two Dozen (Or So) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project*.[4] The inspiration for the book came from a long-unpublished lecture Alvin Plantinga had first given in a summer seminar in Bellingham, Washington, in 1986. He repeated the lecture later that year at the Wheaton College Philosophy Conference.

Plantinga is well known for lots of reasons, one being the fact that he is a proponent and major representative of reformed epistemology, according to which, even if there were no discursive propositional evidence for God's existence, belief in God could still be fully justified, rational, and warranted. Critics might take this to suggest that there are no good arguments for God's existence, but this is not Plantinga's view. He thinks that rational belief in God does not require good theistic arguments, but he believes several such arguments are actually available.

Indeed, his lecture "Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments" drives this point home.[5] Such arguments are in fact on offer, he thinks, and they can actually serve quite a variety of purposes. Plantinga has identified four such purposes:

> First, [theistic arguments] can move someone closer to theism—by showing, for example, that theism is a legitimate intellectual option. Second, they reveal interesting and important connections between various elements of a theist's set of beliefs. For example, a good theistic argument reveals connections between premises and conclusions, connections that in some cases can also contribute to the broader project of Christian philosophy by showing good ways to think about a certain topic or area from a theistic perspective. Examples would be the arguments from counterfactuals, numbers, propositions, sets, and properties. Third, the arguments can strengthen and confirm theistic belief. Not nearly all believers hold theistic beliefs in serene and uninterrupted certainty; most are at least occasionally subject to doubts. Here these arguments can be useful. Finally, and connected with the last, these arguments can increase the warrant of theistic belief. For me as for most, belief in God, while accepted in the basic way, isn't maximally firm and unwavering; perhaps it isn't nearly as firm as my belief in other minds. Then perhaps good theistic arguments could play the role of confirming and strengthening belief in God; in that way, they might increase the degree of warrant belief in God has for me.[6]

To Plantinga's thinking, arguments for God can add intellectual credibility to theism, reveal interesting and important connections between various elements of a theist's beliefs, strengthen and confirm theistic belief, and increase the warrant of theistic belief. Note that not all of these purposes are strictly apologetic; short of demonstrating God's existence, there can be other important functions served by theistic arguments, including moral ones.

It is not at all our view that questions of God and morality are all and only about the evidential matter. This natural theological dimension of the discussion is almost certainly not the most important topic of discussion about theism and moral truth, and we do not intend to intimate otherwise. Still, what evidential significance important moral truths may possess is an important and worthwhile matter, and it is our desire here to explore this question. We do so in the hope of acquainting readers with the shape of the discussion, some of its history, and the separable parts of the case to be built.

In recent years there has emerged in apologetic circles a divide of sorts between philosophical and cultural apologetics. This book will feature aspects of both. There will be no shortage of philosophical arguments and counterarguments and such, but we will also attempt to provide plenty of thick thought experiments, some drawn from such resources as literature and popular culture. Moral apologetics invariably includes elements of both philosophy and the culture in which we live and that, in ever so many ways, shapes our perspectives.

We have each had many occasions to offer a moral argument for God's existence before. Our first extended discussion about it was at a book panel discussion at the Evangelical Philosophical Association in 2011. Our friend Mark Foreman had orchestrated it, and it included Jerry Walls and Paul Copan. The result was a stimulating, enjoyable, and collegial exchange, the opening salvo in a conversation that we have enjoyed through the years.

Then, about four years ago now, we were able to teach a course on this topic together at Houston Christian University, a class that included both official students and several dozen attentive and curious auditors. The occasion furnished us the chance to think about our mutual approaches to this argument, noting both similarities and differences. The similarities, to our thinking, are more numerous and important than the differences, but the

variety that featured in our disparate arguments made the ensuing conversation a fruitful one. Eventually the idea independently occurred to us both that we might wish to collaborate together on a book on the moral argument(s). That's the origin story of this volume.

Having debated numerous times on the moral argument and having written about it at length, we hope that this book provides a valuable opportunity to take stock of the current state of discussion about it. Complexities have arisen along the way, objections raised, rejoinders offered, nuances added. This is an apt moment to appraise the discussion, offer the lay of the land, and consolidate an array of findings. It is difficult to find one book that encapsulates the whole discussion in relatively brief format; this is what we attempt to do, in order to give readers an aerial perspective of the range of issues that such arguments raise. Of course, this means that sometimes we will have to give unforgivably brief treatments of aspects of the discussion, but when we do, we will try to offer suggestions for further reading.

As we see it, there are three main, conceptually distinct agendas that need to be undertaken. What logically comes first is a defense of a sturdy version of moral realism. A moral argument for God seems to need this as a starting point. Talk of objective moral values and duties provides a useful example. A defense of such moral realities requires two steps. First, a critique is needed of metaethical theories other than moral realism. These include such theories as error theory, expressivism, and constructivism. Second, positive reasons should be provided to endorse moral realism.

When Plantinga gave his lecture on a couple dozen arguments back in 1986, his eventual goal was to write a book based on the arguments, each of which, he thought, deserved loving attention and development. He came to hope that others would be moved to work them out and develop them in more detail since the arguments as they stand are merely argument sketches or maybe pointers to good arguments.

Of the two dozen arguments, Plantinga was asked at the conference which argument(s) struck him as the most compelling. To which Plantinga responded, "I'm inclined to think the moral arguments the most compelling. I find it hard to see how there can be genuine moral obligation apart from a divine command. And since I think there really is genuine moral obligation —I'm wholeheartedly committed to that—that seems to me to be an

argument with a very strong premise and a pretty good connection between premise and conclusion."[7] We adduce this reference not to appeal to Plantinga's authority to establish any such point; we merely offer it as intriguing and suggestive as we get underway in our investigation.[8]

As it happens, however, upon further reflection Plantinga changed his mind and identified a different argument as the most compelling—namely, a cumulative case argument for God. This involves the attempt to put a number of arguments together into an overall case. Their collective force is stronger than any single argument in isolation. We tend to concur, and thus see the effort of this book as part of a much broader discussion of which moral evidence is just one part. Nevertheless, we concur with Plantinga that moral arguments do indeed have a great deal of intuitive appeal and evidential force. Readers will have to decide for themselves at the end of our treatment whether they agree.

In a nutshell, what is our operative game plan for the book? Part 1 canvasses a criminally brief history of the moral argument culminating in our current moment. The history of the argument is far richer than many realize. We will have to be quick about it, featuring more breadth than depth, but it's a history worth considering. History plays an important role throughout the book; when we canvass various metaethical perspectives, we often try to trace them to their original sources, contextualizing them a bit in the process. Philosophy sometimes suffers for being a bit ahistorical, but we aim to avoid that pitfall here by at least gesturing at the fertile history of the moral argument.

Please be forewarned, when it comes to contemporary figures in particular, that there were too many of them to do them justice, so we end up having to be painfully succinct, privileging breadth over depth. We offer, for those who are interested, more resources in the notes to find fuller treatments of such luminaries. This challenge, however, had the salutary effect of inspiring the idea for a book-length project of contemporary formulations of the moral argument. This book obviously does not provide that needed treatment, but it's one we might like to write in the future. Whether we do or someone else does, it's a project that needs to happen.

Then part 2 offers an overview of metaethical issues in an effort to defend moral realism—the notion that there are robustly objective moral realities in need of explanation. Since moral skepticism seems to be on the

rise in certain quarters, the natural starting point in our investigation is an examination of the case for such moral realities as objective moral values and duties. This will require that we critically examine various metaethical alternatives to moral realism and construct a positive case for the truth of moral realism. At that point in the discussion, we will argue that theism should remain on the table of its possible explanations.

Part 3 builds on this history by offering a fivefold moral argument for God's existence. The five aspects of our case will be these: (1) objective moral values and human worth, (2) objective moral duties, (3) moral knowledge, (4) the coincidence of happiness and virtue, and (5) moral transformation. Just as there are cumulative cases for God's existence that draw on several arguments from natural theology, so too a cumulative moral case for God can be built by combining several moral considerations into one overall argument, which we will do in the final chapter of part 3.

Finally, in part 4, we will consider naturalistic and secular accounts. We will focus especially on atheistic Platonism, the most important nonnaturalistic metaethical theory that poses a rival to theistic ethics. This discussion helps when one wishes to argue for the comparative superiority of theism as an explanation of moral phenomena, but we intentionally defer it until the end because in the main body of the book we want to emphasize the strengths of a theistic explanation and hold in abeyance the comparative analysis. Doing it this way will hopefully conduce to clarity and help structure the discussion without devaluing the importance of this final step.

The conclusion, in a merely tentative and suggestive sort of way, gestures toward several ways in which one might attempt to extend the moral argument to something more distinctively Christian. Much cutting-edge work remains to be done in this area.

1 Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Yale University Press, 2014), 100.

2 C. S. Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed," in *God in the Dock* (Eerdmans, 1970), 230.

[3] For a succinct account of theistic personalism, a variant of classical theism as we see it, see Ronnie P. Campbell Jr. and David Baggett, *A Personal God and a Good World: The Coherence of the Christian Moral Vision* (B&H Academic, 2024).

[4] Jerry L. Walls and Trent Dougherty, eds., *Two Dozen (Or So) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

[5] The notes for Plantinga's talk were not published until 2007, appearing as an appendix of a volume devoted to Plantinga's work edited by Deane-Peter Baker. See Deane-Peter Baker, ed., *Alvin Plantinga* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[6] Alvin Plantinga, "Preface to the Appendix," in Baker, *Alvin Plantinga*, 209.

[7] Walls and Dougherty, *Two Dozen*, 447.

[8] In his experience of debating on college campuses, William Lane Craig has found the moral argument to be generally the most convincing argument to college students.

PART 1

Historical Highlights of the Moral Argument

In this first portion of the book, we hope to lay out, in all too cursory terms, a sketch of some of the highlights of the rich history of the moral argument.[1] Many are aware of one or a few examples of luminaries from its history, but there were actually quite a few. For the sake of chronicling this abbreviated history, we divide the discussion into five periods: ancient Greek philosophy, medievalism from Augustine to Ockham, early modernity, late modernity, and the contemporary scene. In light of the range and diversity of figures to be covered, each chapter in this first section will feature an overview at the end.

[1] We offer but thumbnail sketches of some of the major figures writing on the moral argument. For a more fulsome history, see David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *The Moral Argument: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

1

Ancient Greek Philosophers

Where does the story of the moral argument begin? Numerous potential candidates present themselves, but we choose to go clear back to ancient Greece. The cast of characters is long, from the likes of Thrasymachus or Alcibiades to Callicles or Glaucon, but we direct your attention most specifically to Socrates (469–399 BC), Plato (ca. 428–347 BC), and Aristotle (384–322 BC). In rudimentary ways, these three luminaries charted much of the subsequent history of Western philosophy. Socrates did not write any of the dialogues in which he was often the key player; his student Plato wrote most of them. The Platonic dialogues are often distinguished between early, middle, and late dialogues. In general, the earliest dialogues are thought to represent best Socrates's own views.

The Euthyphro Dilemma

One early dialogue in particular deserves our attention, so we will start there: *Euthyphro*. The dialogue features two characters: Euthyphro and Socrates. Euthyphro is bringing suit against someone, while Socrates has just learned of an indictment against himself. They meet in the Hall of the King, "king" here being an anachronistic title retained by the magistrate who has jurisdiction over crimes affecting the state religion. This context is significant because it immediately introduces a religious element into a discussion of piety. Ancient Athenians believed that homicide creates a religious pollution, which is why the case is before the king rather than the archon within whose jurisdiction family matters fell.[1]

Religious themes pervade the dialogue from its earliest scene. Euthyphro is there to indict his own father for murder because of religious concerns, whereas Socrates is facing charges of corrupting the youth by inventing new gods and not believing in the old ones. Perhaps tongue-in-cheek, Socrates called Euthyphro a prophet, and it soon becomes clear that Euthyphro prided himself as a religious expert replete with all the credentials of orthodoxy and fully acquainted with and a firm believer in the myths about the Greek pantheon of gods. As for Socrates, he will later admit his own incredulity concerning many of these myths.

Socrates was shocked to find out what Euthyphro was up to. Especially in ancient Greek culture, filial duties should preclude it. Euthyphro, however, defended himself since his father had cruelly mistreated a field laborer (likely a slave) accused of wrongdoing, binding him hand and foot and allowing him to die of neglect and exposure while awaiting religious instructions for what to do with him next. Peter Geach was no doubt right that in quite a number of civilized jurisdictions Euthyphro's father would be held guilty of a serious crime.[2]

Euthyphro may well have been motivated by specifically religious considerations conditioned by his being a religious seer with Orphic tendencies. He would have been anxious to deliver himself, his father, and his family from the religious pollution that the homicide was thought to have produced. Euthyphro was likely troubled by the taint thought to cling to the guilty party and his associates until it is removed by legal action. Euthyphro believed that the law called for the suit to be brought against wrongdoers instead of leaving matters to their own arbitration. For according to Attic law, everyone was expected to bring prosecution in cases of death, and that was a context that did not include all the moral, legal, and religious distinctions between intentional murder and accidental homicide that we take for granted today.[3]

Intertwined with the religious theme is a concern for justice. Perhaps disingenuously, Socrates conceded that Euthyphro must have had a clear conception indeed of what justice and piety are because he was so confident in what he was doing in bringing suit against his own father. Euthyphro quite agreed, standing ready to affirm his own knowledge of what justice involves. For Euthyphro, justice is rooted in divine law. On his view, only fallible and vacillating human law would consider as morally relevant

whether the murder was committed by a relative. Divine law is more universal than that, he insisted, applying equally to all instances of injustices irrespective of the identity of the victim or accused. Pollution spreads just the same whether the murderer is a foreigner or kin. On Euthyphro's analysis, then, the concern for justice is tantamount to a concern for the divine law, and his tenacious determination to proceed with his cause remained resolute despite any resistance he confronted.

As was his wont, Socrates pleaded with Euthyphro to explain what righteousness and sacrilege are regarding murder and such, and to explain what piety's and impiety's unchanging and essential natures are. Socrates claimed to be ignorant of such things. Recall that his claims of ignorance were related to the sense in which he conceded that the Oracle of Delphi was right that Socrates was the wisest of all: Whereas he was just as ignorant as anyone else, he at least knew that he was ignorant, while others claimed not to be ignorant. In this way, Socrates knew one more thing than they. Socrates's query leads to the heart of the dialogue.

At first it may seem that Socrates was simply asking for nothing more than a workable criterion by which to identify certain pious acts. This makes unsurprising Euthyphro's first answer. He replied that piety means doing what he himself was doing (or as Zeus and Cronos had also done, as legend had it)—namely, prosecuting an unjust individual who had committed murder or sacrilege. This answer is not entirely off track, for definition by example ("ostension," as it is called) is often a useful way of clarifying a concept. Particularly when a concept's essential nature is difficult to identify or explicate, adducing relevant examples can help cultivate the habit of and develop facility at recognizing its instances. Ludwig Wittgenstein accentuated this point by reminding us that formal definition is only one way of elucidating a concept and, indeed, that sets of examples can sometimes work just as well. Socrates was notorious for needling his interlocutors for precise definitions of notoriously challenging ideas, but his own modus operandi of using mundane examples from life to clarify, illustrate, or otherwise signify various notions or concepts actually comports with Wittgenstein's corrective.

Socrates clarified that he was after the distinctive characteristic that makes pious actions pious, leading to Euthyphro's second formulation of a definition of piety: What is pleasing to the gods is pious, and what is not

pleasing to the gods is impious (6E7–8). Socrates was more pleased with this answer, because it has the right form for an answer this time, and he set himself to the task of subjecting it to critical scrutiny. He began by distinguishing between factual and normative matters, arguing that whereas clear decision procedures can be found for adjudicating conflicts over matters of fact, no such procedures apply for normative matters. The former pertains to the way the world is; the latter, to how the world ought to be. Genuine disputes tend to arise over matters of the just and unjust, the good and bad, normative matters more so than factual ones.

Euthyphro allowed this point to go uncontested, but it is not clear that factual questions are always decisively answerable or that issues of morality are not. Conflicting eyewitness accounts of an event illustrate a situation in which no decision procedures are in place to resolve all such disputes. Acrimonious battles can and do arise in the realm of factual or empirical questions. Although moral questions sometimes generate heated contention, often they do not. The rich scope of moral consensus around the world and throughout history on a range of matters might lead us to expect that among, say, ideally rational, ethically imaginative, and epistemically privileged disputants, a great deal of moral convergence may result.

Still, suppose we grant Socrates's point that the most contentious battles are bound to take place over normative questions. He then deployed this insight against Euthyphro's second definition of piety. Euthyphro had already affirmed his faith in myths according to which the gods quarrel and battle. Thus, are not such conflicts likely to involve questions of normativity and justice? If so, then appealing to the dictates of the gods and to the objects of their love is sure to be an unreliable guide to the content of ethics. Their conflicts suggest that they disagree about piety and that the objects of their affections diverge. What the gods love cannot provide a stable source of ethical content if they do not all love the same thing.

At the heart of Socrates's concern is the matter of arbitrariness. Rather than providing an objective standard, Euthyphro had introduced a relativistic element according to which the moral status of an action or attitude can vary depending on which god's predilections and preferences have primacy. This recurring theme of the caprice of Euthyphro's gods is arguably the unifying thread of the dialogue dramatically, philosophically, and practically.[4] Socrates frankly stated that piety and impiety cannot be

defined by appeal to the love of gods admitting of such disagreement (9C4–5). For purposes of continued discussion, Socrates let Euthyphro off the hook on this point, but it is likely that he thought the argument was already over.

This then led to Euthyphro's third effort to define piety: The pious is what is loved by all the gods, and the impious is what is hated by all the gods. This sets to the side those actions about which the gods are ambivalent. This proposal elicited the famous "Euthyphro Dilemma" (ED): Do the gods love piety because it is pious or is it pious because they love it? The remaining portion of the dialogue finds Socrates considering piety and justice and arguing that justice is the broader category of which piety is just a subclass. This led to Euthyphro's construal of religious practice as a kind of business transaction featuring capricious gods susceptible to men's currying their favor. Socrates could not countenance such theology. In the *Republic*, Plato made clear that of the three dangerous doctrines of (1) atheism, (2) deities unconcerned with human affairs, and (3) deities bribed by sacrifices, the last is the most pernicious (379A–383C).

The Euthyphro Dilemma is of the utmost significance for present purposes because it is often taken to be a decisive refutation of any effort to ground morality in the supernatural realm. If theistic ethics thus fails, so does the moral argument, since the former is an essential element of the latter. The structure of the moral argument requires three pieces: a defense of moral realism, a sturdy critique of secular ethics, and a theistic ethic that provides a better account of moral truth and knowledge. Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, a protégé of Thomas Nagel and author of *Plato at the Googleplex*, has confidently written this about the ED:

> Socrates proceeds to formulate a line of reasoning that will prove to be of fundamental importance in the history of secularism, one that will be adapted by freethinkers from Spinoza to Bertrand Russell to the so-called new atheists of today, persuasively arguing that a belief in the gods—or God—cannot provide the philosophical grounding for morality. . . . What is still referred to as "the Euthyphro Dilemma" or "the Euthyphro Argument" remains one of the most frequently utilized arguments against the claim that morality can be grounded only in theology, that it is only the belief in God that stands between us and the moral abyss of nihilism. Dostoevsky may have declared that "without God all is permissible," but Plato's preemptive riposte, sent out to us across the millennia, is that any act morally impermissible with God is morally impermissible without him, making clear how little the addition of God helps to clarify the ethical situation. The argument Plato has Socrates make in the *Euthyphro* is one of the most important in the history of moral philosophy. . . . We humans must reason our way to morality or

> we will not get there at all. Relying on fiats, even should they emanate from on high, will not allow us to achieve an understanding of virtue.[5]

Goldstein is right about the importance of the Dilemma, even if she ends up overstating or misconstruing its significance. Antony Flew once wrote that a good test of a person's aptitude for philosophy is whether one can feel the Dilemma's force and point. It has stood the test of time, posing a stiff challenge to various versions of theistic ethics. Neither of its horns offers an attractive option for most theists. Before laying out those two horns, let us make three observations about Goldstein's analysis.

First, notice that, at one point at least, she casts Euthyphro's position in terms of *belief in* God or the gods rather than the existential matter of God's or the gods' existence. Second, she seems to consider irrelevant any distinctions to be drawn between Euthyphro's pantheon of fickle deities, on the one hand, and God understood as (say) the greatest possible being, on the other. Third, she smuggles into her analysis that Euthyphro's position is that a theistic picture is the only or perhaps even the only possible workable account of moral foundations. All three of these points will be eventually addressed.

Regarding the distinction between polytheism and monotheism, Homer and Hesiod had fired the Greek imagination, populating it with an array of capricious and contentious gods. Interesting to note that, a few centuries after Plato, the apostle Paul would visit Athens. There, where Socrates had claimed ignorance, Paul argued at Mars Hill that the hour of ignorance was over because God had raised Jesus from the dead (*anastasis*). In a sort of epic clash of Hebraic and Hellenistic worldviews in Acts 17, Paul confidently distinguished between God and the gods (idols). We readily concede that Euthyphro's gods are not an adequate foundation for morality, but the import of that concession may be quite different from what Goldstein infers.

Why do Goldstein and plenty of others think that the ED poses an intractable objection to theistic ethics? Because it provides two possibilities, neither of which bodes well for grounding morality in the divine. Either something is moral (just, pious, etc.) as a function of divine caprice, or what the gods identify as moral is already moral apart from God or the gods. If morality is a function of what the gods love, or what God commands, then

morality is just arbitrary. So much the worse for theistic ethics! Rather, God at most clues us in about the content of morality that does not need a theistic foundation, but in that case God is rendered superfluous (save for performing an epistemic function). So, Goldstein concludes, the addition of God adds little to no clarity to the moral situation.

We will return to such Euthyphro-inspired objections later on, but for now let us identify another strand of Platonic thought that may point in a different direction.

The Platonic Man

Here we need to shift our attention to later Platonic dialogues, where the salient voice is more Plato's than that of Socrates. Before leaving Socrates behind, though, something is worth noting. It is easy to come away from the *Euthyphro* thinking Socrates a religious skeptic, and of course he was skeptical of the Greek lore that Euthyphro believed. However, Socrates in fact saw himself as on a divine mission. Some early Christian apologists identified resonances between Socrates and Jesus, and others have noted the similar structure of Paul's address at Mars Hill and that of Socrates in the *Apology* (another Socratic dialogue): dialogue, accusation, explanation. Socrates and Paul were both quite skeptical of the gods worshiped all around them.

In their introduction to the *Apology*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns describe Socrates as a servant of divine power living in obedience to God.[6] Throughout the dialogue Socrates expressed his submission to the will and command of God. Facing charges of impiety, he left the outcome in the hands of providence, recognizing that his highest goal was to serve God and search out his truth and commands. He saw his philosophical mission of teaching and exhortation as direct service to God.[7]

Let us turn now to his protégé Plato, especially some of his later work, where we see a most interesting development.[8] Alfred North Whitehead once said that all of Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato, and arguably the reasoning at the heart of the moral argument goes all the way back to Plato. As Plato increasingly found his own voice, he articulated a rather ambitious metaphysical picture. Plato argued that things have goodness

insofar as they stand in some relation to the Good, which subsists in itself as an Idea, an abstract object endowed, however, with causal power to affect the world. What Plato has to say about Goodness is quite remarkable and prescient, especially in the *Symposium* and *Republic*. The Forms for Plato were these perfect archetypes, exemplars that provide the foundation for what we find in our physical world. For Plato, the Form of the Good was the most important Form of all—the foundation of all the other Forms for Plato, and is constitutive of ultimate reality, subsisting in itself and the ultimate standard in all evaluations of goodness.

Christian philosopher George Mavrodes wrote, "A Platonic man . . . who sets himself to live in accordance with the Good aligns himself with what is deepest and most basic in existence. . . . To put it another way, we might say that whatever values a Platonic world imposes on a man are values to which the Platonic world itself is committed, through and through."[9] Suffice it to say when one studies the history of the moral argument, thinker after thinker harks back to what Plato had to say about the Good. It is natural to ask what it suggests about ultimate reality if indeed moral truths are such deep truths about the universe.

Some contemporary Platonists think of morality as independently existing brute facts admitting of and requiring no further explanation, perhaps akin to mathematical facts. We will have occasion in a later chapter to consider such theories in more detail, but an interesting observation is that this script can be flipped. If, say, authoritative moral obligations exist, then they would be strange sorts of entities in a naturalistic world, as J. L. Mackie would later argue. In contrast, they would fit rather comfortably in a theistic world created and sustained by a loving Creator. This is the central import of the Mavrodes article just adduced, and Mavrodes is not alone in this regard. John Rist writes the following about Platonism:

> Plato's account of the "Forms" (including the Good) as moral exemplars leaves them in metaphysical limbo. They would exist as essentially intelligible ideas even if there were no mind, human or divine, to recognize them: as objects of thought, not mere constructs or concepts. But, as Augustine learned, and as the Greek Neoplatonists had asserted, the notion of an eternal object of thought (and thus for Plato a cause of thought) without a ceaseless thinking subject is unintelligible. Intelligible Forms, never proposed as mere concepts, cannot be proposed as Plato originally proposed them, as free-floating metaphysical items.[10]

Whether realism generally, and moral realism particularly, requires mind-independence is an important question. Moral realism is a topic we will take up in part 2 of this book, but for now we just introduce it as an important question to consider. If there are, say, moral truths that are invariant, necessary, universal, and the like, but depend on God's mind, does that mean that moral realism is false, or rather that realism is consistent with mind-dependence after all, as long as the mind in question is God's? That different answers to this question are possible accounts for why theistic ethics is sometimes described as realist and at other times as constructivist. We will argue that the former designation is the more apt.

The Philosopher

The third and last major figure we wish to discuss from ancient Greece is Aristotle, "the Philosopher," as he was affectionately known. Socrates had taught Plato, and then Plato taught Aristotle. A common practice is to contrast the teachings of Plato and Aristotle. In ethics, for example, whereas Plato emphasized the Forms, Aristotle's focus was on a life well lived. In Raphael's famous fresco *The School of Athens*, the two most central figures are Plato and Aristotle. Plato is pointing upward while holding the *Timaeus*, which describes the causal influence of the eternal Forms. The younger Aristotle, in contrast, holds his arm and the book he is carrying horizontally; the book is his *Nicomachean Ethics* that describes the best earthly life for human beings. It was not that Aristotle did not believe in the Forms, but unlike Plato, who thought they were beyond us, Aristotle thought that they inhere in the substances we experience. This distinction has led no small number of later adherents to interpret Plato's ethics in more transcendent terms, Aristotle's in more immanent terms.

Aristotle himself was wont to characterize his ethical convictions as naturalistic. Whereas contemporary Platonists are inclined to point to nonnatural properties or relations, like abstract objects, most contemporary Aristotelian ethicists are more likely to point to naturalistic properties. Secular ethicists nowadays tend to choose one or the other: something like moral facts existing as brute facts that merely supervene on natural facts, or moral facts that are in some sense the same as natural properties. Speaking

quite generally, the former is in the spirit of Plato, and the latter, in the spirit of Aristotle.

This makes Aristotle sound as though he were uninterested in religion. Larry Arnhart writes this: "Aristotle says so little about religion in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that one could easily infer that it contributes nothing essential to the ethical life of human beings."[11] The historical picture, however, is a fair bit messier than that. Aristotle's naturalism was not contrasted with supernaturalism but with the artificial. Aristotle contrasted the merely human and the divine in humanity and also contrasted this human-divine element and the God who attracts us from outside the human sphere.[12]

Aristotle had a tendency to point to garden-variety "goods" that we experience in life—meaningful labor, friendship, and the like. Perhaps for such reasons, when asked what Aristotle thought was the highest good, many would think the right answer is this: fulfilling our telos and becoming people of reason and virtue. In truth, however, what Aristotle considered the highest good of all involved something quite transcendent indeed—namely, fellowship with the divine. Again, the "vertical" plays an important part in his approach.

Relatedly, Aristotle was inclined to cash out the notion of goodness by reference to the purpose of a thing. This is "goodness of a kind." A knife's goodness depends on the effectiveness with which it serves its purpose. Likewise with human beings; we, too, he thought, have a purpose and goal (or telos). How effectively do we serve our purpose? That will determine our goodness, he would say. This naturally raises an important question: What *is* our purpose? Much of the Judeo-Christian tradition would share with Aristotle a strong sense of human and moral teleology. For example, both Aristotelian and theistic ethicists would agree that a life of virtue fits our nature. As mentioned, for Aristotle the highest activity of which we are capable is contemplation of the divine.

This suggests that the comparison between Plato and Aristotle might be just as important as the contrast. At least this is the argument John Hare offers when discussing Raphael's famous painting. Hare doesn't consider the overall impression to be one of tension so much as harmony and collaboration, "each emphasizing a complementary and necessary part of the whole truth." Hare writes, "It is as though they are together generating

the forces (upward and inward) that keep the whole circle of thinkers rotating in their prescribed orbits." On this view, the fresco is an expression of synthesis, which various thinkers have discussed through the centuries, including Egidio da Viterbo, who aimed to recast the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard according to the mind of Plato.[13]

Particularly relevant for present purposes is this primacy Aristotle assigned to teleology. We mentioned the purpose of a knife, but even better examples come from organic life. A plant, for example, reaches for the sun. Aristotle was a first-rate empirical researcher, but his observations of the physical world were not guided by a framework of inert bodies acted on by external forces. He saw the world as more dynamic than that. He was more the biologist and thought in terms of organisms, like plants. The material is alive, beginning with a seed or an embryo and then, if all goes to plan, developing until it reaches maturity and reproduces itself. As Ben Lipscomb puts it, "Everything in nature . . . is somewhere along an arc of self-directed development from immaturity to maturity to senescence to death."[14]

This strong sense of teleology shaped Aristotle's ethics. The ethical ideal for human life is to realize our natural potential, and the task of ethics is to describe this ideal. Having grasped the ideal, rational animals can direct themselves toward it. This is an interesting realist picture of the world and of ethics, one in which teleology plays a critical role. More mechanistic pictures of reality in the Western world would eventually resist such Aristotelian pictures, but a strongly teleological picture would resonate well with such classical theistic paradigms as Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

One more quick observation for now: If we think of a thing's being good in terms of doing well what it was designed for, another crucial question seems to be this: Is what it was designed for good? Suppose you raise someone to be the ideal serial killer. He might end up a good serial killer, but that is hardly good. Of course, some might say this is consistent with Aristotle, because being a serial killer does not fit our nature, which is a useful reminder that answering certain ethical questions isn't easy without giving serious thought to issues of anthropology—What is it that we are as human beings? This is something that must be borne in mind when one talks about, say, rival conceptions of the good. G. K. Chesterton is often quoted as saying that the word "good" has many meanings. For example, if

a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of five hundred yards, we should call him a good shot but not necessarily a good man.

This mention of goodness leads to an important point by way of a brief preview of coming attractions. In very general terms, a Platonist approach tends to speak of goodness simpliciter, or goodness per se. A more Aristotelian approach, again in most general terms, indexes goodness to particular things and speaks of what it means for, say, a person to be good or a tomato to be good. What it takes for a person *to be* good is closely related to what is *good for* a person. This rough distinction between Platonic and Aristotelian emphases regarding the good proves to be relevant as we later discuss objective moral values. Sometimes such discussions will gravitate toward treatment of thick ethical concepts like justice or holiness or moral goodness per se, while at other times they will move in the direction of asking what is good for human beings—like friendship or meaningful work. Both sets of questions strike us as eminently important and worthwhile, and, in the spirit of seeing Raphael's fresco as an expression of synthesis, we will push for a rapprochement of both concerns. For example, following Robert Adams, we will be inclined to adopt and defend the view that what is good for us as human beings is also what is good in and of itself.

Finally, questions concerning moral goodness (and moral values generally) are *axiological* questions. Questions about moral duties or obligations are called *deontic* questions. Rightness and wrongness pertain to the deontic matter of moral duties and are called substantive ethical questions, but so are issues concerning virtue and vice.[15] Aristotle had a good deal to say about virtue theory. To his thinking, the virtues are achieved through practice as people are appropriately moderate, hitting the golden mean between extremes of excess and deficiency. A virtue like courage, for example, avoids both rashness and cowardice. This means that moral errors come in pairs, on his view. There are other theories of virtue, but we mention them here at the end of discussing Aristotle because theistic ethics, besides discussing goodness and rightness, also tends to say quite a bit about issues of virtue.

Moreover, what ethical frameworks have to say on these various matters are not necessarily at odds, because it may be that these varied dimensions of morality concern different matters. This is not to suggest that they are not

related; surely they are. Nevertheless, a theory of moral duties that appeals, say, to God's will or nature or commands or desires need not be in tension with a strong emphasis on the virtues as well. Developing a virtuous character may, as C. Stephen Evans puts it, be the purpose of the moral life: a transformation of character that enables people to love what is appropriate to love and hate what ought to be hated. The role played by a theory of virtue is likely different from the role played by a theory of the good or a theory of the right. In light of the importance of the quality of moral character, surely there should be ample room for a substantive theory of the virtues.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTER 1

We have intentionally limited our focus in this first chapter on the history of the moral argument to three snapshots from ancient Greece, roughly corresponding to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. First we looked at the Euthyphro Dilemma that arose in an early Platonic dialogue, *Euthyphro*, that is usually associated with Socrates's own views. There Socrates challenged Euthyphro's attempt to ground the pious or just in the loves of the gods. Put in contemporary terms, the Dilemma might ask if something is moral because God commands it or if God commands something because it is moral. Both horns are thought problematic for the theistic ethicist, which does not bode well for the moral argument for God's existence. One horn suggests that morality is arbitrary; the other, that God is irrelevant to what is moral.

The "Platonic Man," as George Mavrodes calls him, follows Plato in thinking that whatever values a Platonic world imposes on a man are values to which the Platonic world itself is committed, through and through. Moral truths are an ineliminable feature of such a world, and they possess authoritative power. Contemporary followers of Plato tend to believe in moral realities as brute facts that exist without any need for further explanation.

Aristotle is often contrasted with Plato because of his this-worldly empirical emphasis, but we argued that the comparison and

complementarity with Plato is just as important as, if not more important than, the differences. In particular, Aristotle's strong teleological emphasis would prove to be quite congenial to robustly supernaturalist pictures of the world. Even so, most contemporary Aristotelians have accorded less importance to the theistic elements in his moral system while retaining his emphasis on normative behaviors that somehow fit our nature. A prospect we find especially exciting is effecting a synthesis of aspects of Platonic and Aristotelian thought about ethics in particular.

1 Roslyn Weiss, "Euthyphro's Failure," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24 (1986): 438.

2 Peter Geach, "Plato's 'Euthyphro': An Analysis and Commentary," *Monist* 50 (1966): 370.

3 See R. G. Hoerber, "Plato's 'Euthyphro,'" *Phronesis* 3 (1958): 97–98.

4 See Weiss, "Euthyphro's Failure," 437.

5 Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away* (Pantheon, 2014), 306–7.

6 Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton University Press, 1961), 3. The tenth book of Plato's *Laws* has also proven to be important to aspects of moral apologetics discussed in A. E. Taylor, Clement Webb, and others, as we will see.

7 See, for example, 19a, 23b, 28e, 29d, 30a, 30d, 31d, 33c, and 42a. C. Stephen Evans points out that Socrates seemed to have thought of moral obligations, like his own duty to fulfill his divine mission, much as contemporaries do: Their four salient features are that they (1) provide a verdict on our actions, (2) bring reflection to closure, (3) involve accountability or responsibility, and (4) hold for persons as persons. See C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 12–15. Elizabeth Anscombe argued that the notion of moral obligations as law-like verdicts on our actions was a result of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which certainly has wielded a formidable influence on ethical thought in the Western world. What Evans points out challenges this view, though, showing that moral obligations have a longer history,

however much Christianity may have accentuated their importance. Perhaps what John Henry Newman cast as the amplifying role of special revelation is what is at play here: Special revelation extends and augments the truths that natural religion had already hinted at.

8 By the way, starting a discussion of ethics with Socrates and Plato would appall Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche had something of a love/hate relationship with Socrates, but at least generally speaking, especially in his *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche made clear that he saw Socrates and Plato as much more Apollonian figures than Dionysian, and Nietzsche himself gravitated more toward the Dionysian. Apollo represents beauty and structure and order and the notion that knowledge can solve all the world's problems. Dionysus, the other art god of the Greek world, represents wildness and disorder and chaos—and the way the world in many ways is outside our grasp, unable to be made full sense of or categorized in a neat and orderly way. Reality isn't rational; it's actually irremediably tragic, and only art can enable us to face this and still emerge victorious. Nietzsche knew that Socrates and Plato are perceived as coming out on top, but he lamented this and in certain ways saw Socrates as the villain.

9 George Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 2nd ed., ed. Louis P. Pojman (Wadsworth, 1995), 587.

10 John M. Rist, *Real Ethics: Rethinking the Foundations of Morality* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 40. Alvin Plantinga echoes a similar but even more expansive sentiment in his famous APA Presidential Address "How to Be an Anti-Realist," concluding in this way: "The thesis, then, is that truth cannot be independent of noetic activity on the part of persons. The antithesis is that it must be independent of our noetic activity. And the synthesis is that truth is independent of our intellectual activity but not of God's." See Alvin Plantinga, "How to Be an Anti-Realist," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 56, no. 1 (September 1982): 52. The potential rapprochement of Platonism and theism is also showcased in Robert Adams's seminal *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

11 Larry Arnhart, *Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature* (State University of New York Press, 1998), 251.

12 John E. Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 67.

13 Hare, *God and Morality*, 8–9. Hare goes on to argue that excising the theistic elements from Aristotle's ethics, as many contemporary ethicists attempt to do, invariably changes the substance of the ethical content.

14 Benjamin Lipscomb, *The Women Are Up to Something* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 10.

15 Deontic questions, in addition to pertaining to moral obligation, also include treatments of moral forbiddenness and permissibility. Our focus will be moral obligations.

2

Medievals from Augustine to Ockham

Two Middle Age thinkers we must briefly discuss are Augustine (354–430) and Aquinas (1225–1274), one from the beginning of the period, the other near the end. They were not just theists but Christians, and we want to make a few quick observations about them and their thoughts about ethics and God. We will also talk about a few other figures from around the time of Aquinas—namely, Anselm (1033–1109), Duns Scotus (1266–1308), and William of Ockham (ca. 1287–1347).

Before discussing Augustine, we begin with a quick word about Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–ca. 395), one of the Cappadocian Fathers who importantly shaped the theology and approach to philosophy of the Eastern (Orthodox) churches for many centuries. Gregory thought that our natural knowledge is based on sense experience; but since God cannot be known via the senses, God's essence is beyond our ken. No positive words are adequate to describe God, and so the famous *via negativa*, or way of negation, became central to his philosophical theology. On this view, God is known less through speculative thought than through mystical contemplation and devotion. In light of the historical importance of this view, which will recur again, we wanted to mention it quickly at this juncture of the chronology.

Augustine: The Doctor of Grace

Augustine was heavily influenced by Plato, probably indirectly because of the Neoplatonists (likely Plotinus and Porphyry). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the goodness of God was a central if not *the* central feature of Augustine's thought. Augustine endorsed the classical moral psychology, according to which we do all that we do in relation to what we take to be our *summum bonum* (highest good). Augustine referred to the supreme good as something that we seek, the good that somehow serves as the foundation of all we do. He thought we desire it not for the sake of something else but for its own sake—something of intrinsic value, not merely instrumental. It is truly called the "end" because we want everything else for its sake, but we want *it* only for *itself*. What is the highest good that everyone is ultimately seeking? God himself, Augustine thought. Recall this famous passage from his *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."[1]

In book 8 of *On the Trinity*, Augustine's aim was to show that God is good and that humans find happiness when they love God. Augustine assumed that loving what is good is a natural and obvious thing to do. This is the human telos. Augustine then noted that there are different goods found in different finite things. There is the good of friendship and of the beauty of nature, for example. Humans prefer some of these goods more than others, and rightly so. In light of this, Augustine thought two points in need of explanation: the human ability to distinguish among the goods and a way to make sense of the ranking of different goods. He suggested that God as *the* ultimate good explains both of these. God impressed on the human mind "some notion of good itself."[2] God is also the standard by which all finite goods are ordered so that God is properly thought of as *the* good. Since the human telos is loving the good, and God is identical to the good, human happiness or eudaimonia is found in loving God.

Augustine also thought quite a bit about the requirements of moral transformation. This was important to his own spiritual development. Before his conversion, he struggled with the moral demands of sexual purity. His famous prayer, "Give me chastity and continence, but not yet!" has caused many a knowing chuckle. Augustine recognized that the moral demand is a high and uncompromising one, beyond our capacity to meet. Yet, as the common deontic refrain goes, "Ought implies can," so how can we be responsible for meeting a demand beyond our capacities? Here

Augustine thought the prescription is God's enabling grace. These words are often attributed to him: "God bids us do what we cannot, that we may know what we ought to seek from him." It's God's grace that enables us to meet the moral demand, which, as we will later see, is an ingredient of a performative variant of the moral argument. Although the moral requirement exceeds our natural capacities, it can and should be met by reliance on additional resources that God provides, a theme that Kant will pick up centuries later.

Augustine wrote, "If you cling to [God] in love, you will straightway enter into bliss," and, "For this is the will of the best and most wise Creator, that the spirit of a man, when piously subject to God, should have a body happily subject, and that this happiness should last forever."[3] This motif will prove relevant to a recurring point in the history of the moral argument that provides a theistic rationale for what Thomas Reid would later call the "coincidence theory," which says that there is deep correspondence between happiness or fulfillment, on the one hand, and a moral and virtuous life, on the other.

As the ultimate reality, the Good served as a surrogate for God in Plato's metaphysical system. With the advent of Christian theism, the Good became identified with God himself by Augustine and various church fathers. On such a picture, God is our true end and highest good, and happiness is found in seeking him. God also enables us to recognize various goods that are good in virtue of relating to the highest good, which is God himself. This Augustinian notion of equating or conflating God and goodness is a key motif in much subsequent history of Christian thought.

An important part of the moral life, for Augustine, is exhibiting "ordinate" affections rather than "inordinate" ones. As competing passions fluctuate within our hearts, actions should align with those that deserve primacy. Augustine refers to this prioritization as the *ordo amoris*, the ordering of loves, which "requires one to be capable of an objective and impartial evaluation of things; to love things, that is to say, in the right order, so that you do not love what is not to be loved, or fail to love what is to be loved or have a greater love for what is to be loved less, or equal love for things that should be loved less or more, or a lesser or greater love for things that should be loved equally."[4]

Despite Plato's influence on Augustine, especially in his early writing, Augustine rejected the Platonic notion that there is a fundamental conflict between spirit and body, one good and one evil. His demotion of evil to the state of a privation or perversion of the good was an important way in which he came to see that they were not merely equal and opposite. However, a conflict does arise when a person loves self more than God, preferring the gratification of bodily desires over submission to God's law. This condition involves disordered loves, loving a lower good more than a higher good. He thought a person's loves can be ordered properly only when God is loved most of all, as Matthew 22:37 describes: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Once more, such a condition comes about only through the operation of God's grace.

The idea he was getting at here and in his *Confessions* is to have the right sorts and amounts of love for various objects. To love something "ordinately" is to have an ordered love: loving something to an appropriate degree and in an appropriate way. To love something "inordinately" is to accord to it a value it does not possess. This runs the risk of something like idolatry. This is tantamount to a failure to properly exercise the will; it amounts to a rejection of rightful authority, reason, and moral truth. Of course, to his thinking, nothing deserves the same commitment, devotion, and fealty that we should have to God himself.

The last point for now to emphasize about Augustine is the divine ideas tradition. This marked another pivot away from Plato, replacing Plato's views about recollection and the myth of preexisting souls with a theory of divine illumination. The human mind can grasp universal truths that mirror the divine ideas in the mind of God. Since human beings are made in God's image, they are conferred this capacity to grasp something about these eternal truths. In addition to that epistemic point, there is also a metaphysical component. All beings depend on God for their existence, a truth rooted in doctrines like creation and trinitarian theology. This picture of radical dependence on God at least suggests, Alvin Plantinga argues, a sort of synthesis that would be later endorsed by most of the theistic tradition and given succinct statement by Thomas Aquinas. That synthesis is that truth is independent of the intellectual activity of human beings but

not of God.[5] Such a conviction functions centrally at the heart of most moral arguments.

That is a relevant smattering of ideas found in Augustine, at any rate, that will prove relevant to the history and development of the moral argument. Before we turn our attention to a later medieval thinker, Anselm, a quick word is in order about one additional figure (and of course all of this is a radically streamlined history). Likely contemporary with or subsequent to Augustine was Pseudo-Dionysius, a scholar much read and discussed during the Middle Ages. He followed Gregory in conducting mystical theology in terms of the *via negativa*, describing God best, on that analysis, by denying or removing all things that are. So God is not in time and does not have a body, for example. We recognize God best when we realize that he defies our categories and exceeds our ideas. Yet Pseudo-Dionysius still thought that we can make some positive affirmations about God concerning his goodness and being because God is the source of goodness and being. God is not just Beauty or Goodness as we know them, though, but is rather "superessential Beauty or Goodness, a kind of Goodness or Beauty that exceeds our comprehension," as Evans puts it.[6] This was a reminder that talk of God historically has often featured elements of transcendence that resist domestication and carve out room for mystery and awe.

Anselm: The Scholastic Doctor

Saint Anselm of Canterbury lived from AD 1033 to 1109. He was a vitally important figure in the history of thought, but the specific reasons we make mention of him here pertain to the nature of God. When discussing moral arguments for God's existence, questions of God's nature are important to delineate. What sort of theology is operative? Earlier we discussed the gods of Euthyphro's pantheon, and such gods do indeed seem eminently susceptible to intractable arbitrariness objections. Not all gods are equal.

The question of what God is like is important when two people have a discussion or dialogue about God's existence. One person might believe in God, and the other does not. Still, it is important that they share some common definition of God. Otherwise, what is the nature of their debate? It would not be clear what is meant by either affirming or rejecting the

existence of God. Some gods are too small. So what sort of conception of God are we using?

Anselm can help on this score. Although Anselm himself was a Christian and a strong believer in special revelation, he was also a firm believer in general revelation. Much of his work was an intentional effort to appeal to the deliverances of reason rather than just to the teachings of Scripture. This is helpful to do when attempting to appeal to those not already convinced of the reliability of the Bible or any other alleged sacred text. Since Anselm himself was a Christian, he was altogether open to a posteriori teachings from Scripture, but as a philosophical thinker he also accorded great importance to what can be known a priori (on the basis not of experience but rather of reason). Anselm for one did not discern difficulty reconciling these two conceptions of God. In his work, he aimed to bring together both rational cogency and biblical integrity.

Anselm is probably best known for offering, in his *Proslogion*, an ontological argument for God's existence. The atheist Colin McGinn, in his autobiography, reports how reading about the ontological argument as a teenager helped inspire his love for philosophy. He was fascinated that by merely thinking hard, philosophers were potentially able to glean insight into questions about ultimate reality. Later he became more skeptical of the ontological argument and rejected belief in God, but the argument continued to occupy a warm place in his heart (or perhaps mind).

One need not accept the ontological argument, however, to use some of the resources of Anselm's analysis in laying out how one thinks about God. Although Michael Huemer and others scorn the ontological argument predicated on Anselm's famous definition,[7] it is important to see that conceiving of God as the greatest possible being in no way commits one to the cogency of the ontological argument. Norman Geisler taught those of us who were his students that even if one does not regard the ontological argument as a successful piece of natural theology, Anselm's argument can still be of tremendous value as a guide to a robust concept of God as a being who is metaphysically necessary, omnipotent, omniscient, and the like.

The basic idea driving Anselm's agenda was this: God is the greatest possible being, which is to suggest that God has all the great-making properties to the maximal degree possible. This is a quite exalted understanding of God, and it would preclude our conferring the status of

deity on, say, the gods of Euthyphro. Great-making properties are those properties thought better to have than not to have, like power or knowledge or goodness. Goodness in this context can refer to either moral goodness or metaphysical goodness. The latter pertains to a picture of absolute ontological completeness; the former, to God's moral perfection. But important to note is that such moral perfection does not derive from God's conforming to a moral rulebook. That would make ascriptions of goodness to God altogether anthropomorphic, Richard Davies is right to point out.[8]

Our main point for now is that defending theistic ethics does not entail defending just any and every conception of God. Some conceptions are philosophically more powerful than others. That the Euthyphro Dilemma falsifies certain conceptions of deity does not mean that it vitiates them all. The operative conception of God that we will use in our analysis is Anselmian—the God of the "omni" qualities. It is also, on occasion, Anselmian in the broader sense of fidelity to biblical insights, since we are of the view that the a priorist and a posteriorist approaches in philosophical theology are reconcilable. We will make it clear when our appeals go beyond the limits of general revelation alone.

We will draw our brief mention of Anselm to a close for now, with just two quick mentions. He introduced a distinction between affections for justice and advantage that Scotus would later tweak and take up; we will discuss that some more. Anselm also offered a solution of sorts to the Euthyphro Dilemma, arguing that it is a false dichotomy. God is taken to neither conform to nor invent the moral order but to embody it: In the case of each of his attributes, God's *having* that attribute *is precisely* that attribute itself.

Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox

The medieval theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) famously proposed five ways of proving God's existence in his *Summa Theologica* I.2.3. Thomas's Fourth Way might be seen as a type of moral argument. He observed that we find in the world a gradation of values: Some things are more good, more true, more noble, and so forth than other things. Such comparative terms describe the varying degrees to which

things approach a superlative standard: the most good, most true, and so forth. There must therefore exist something that is the best and truest and noblest thing of all. Aquinas believed that whatever possesses a property more fully than anything else is the cause of that property in other things. Hence, there is some being that is the cause of the existence, goodness, and any other perfection of finite beings, and this being we call "God." We do not bring up Aquinas here, though, mainly for that particular argument, as suggestive as it might be. We are rather more interested in his particular brand of theistic ethics.

Aquinas was born about eight hundred years after Augustine, and he is often cast as the original "natural law" theorist, paving the way for a long history of natural law in Christian thought ever since. Augustine was more in the tradition of Plato, whereas Aquinas was more Aristotelian. Theistic natural law theorists, motivated by Aquinas, believe that God has manifested his moral law by writing it into human nature and into other aspects of his ordered creation. What we intend to do here is offer, in broad compass, an overall interpretation of natural law as inspired by Aquinas, without preoccupation over fraught fine-grained disagreements. We will have more to say later about the sketch provided, but it will suffice for present purposes to identify the salient feature of Thomas's moral thought to bear in mind as we move along. Again, our goal in this aerial snapshot is far from providing a comprehensive account or discussion of natural law at this juncture. There is much in Aquinas to appreciate; our synopsis must be quite selective.

The natural law is made up of those precepts of the eternal law that govern the behavior of beings possessing reason and free will. Understanding natural law as an account of practical rationality, the natural law theorist aspires to show how actions can be "practically intelligible" (showing that actions have a purpose and are worth pursuing) and to figure out which among potential actions should be performed. A theory of the good accomplishes each of these goals because, according to Aquinas, the fundamental principle of the natural law is that the good is to be done and evil is to be avoided. As Evans puts it, "For Aquinas this is a 'first principle,' like the principle of non-contradiction for theoretical reason, and as such, is regarded as self-evident and not in need of argument."[9] (Theoretical reason is authoritative over belief, whereas practical reason

applies somehow to action.) In this way, natural law theory, at least characteristically, assigns priority to the good, which is what furnishes both the point of actions and knowledge of rational action.

Such an abstract first principle is not enough to provide specific guidance, though, so more needs to be said. Natural lawyers typically point to various goods that are universally and naturally good, and many if not most have followed Aristotle's account of the good for humans in terms of what completes or perfects human nature or what enables human flourishing. So, what are basic goods for human beings? Natural lawyers offer slightly different lists of such goods, but what follows are some of the typically mentioned goods: life and health, knowledge, beauty, friendship, community, fulfilling work, play, inner peace, self-integration, practical reasonableness, and in some cases religious faith and experience. Although natural law is essentially teleological, it is distinguishable from a consequentialist insistence on maximizing some good or other or some aggregate of goods. Persons are rather to respond appropriately to the actual goods they encounter or could actualize.[10]

In Thomism, the school of thought following Aquinas, God functions as an ineliminable part of this picture. For now, we wish to focus only on the most obvious sense in which this is true. Obviously, although this means that what will be said is not all that could be said on the matter, it will be enough for now. If natural law holds true in something close to how Aquinas conceived of it, then an important sense in which God functions centrally in the moral life is that he is the one responsible for having created human beings, and everything else, with the natures they possess. So far we have focused on what natural law has to say about moral goodness, but consider now the issue of moral obligations. Natural lawyers think that serious reflection on human nature can offer insights into our moral duties too. For example, in virtue of human beings' having been created in God's image, they possess great value and worth, which entails that there are authoritatively normative ways in which people should, and should not, be treated. This can help explain, say, the wrongness of torturing children for fun.

This sort of appeal to human nature and assignment of primacy to human flourishing can serve as an example of theistic ethics distinguishable from, say, divine command theory (DCT). The latter is just one sort of theistic

ethic, and not all theistic ethicists need agree on the fine-grained details of their accounts in order to see eye to eye on the broader principle that morality importantly depends on God in one way or another. Interestingly enough, some thinkers have attempted to integrate aspects of divine command theory and natural law. Evans does so, as we will see, by dividing the labor in a particular way: He constructs his DCT on the foundation of a natural law account of the good.[11] In a similar spirit, Hanink and Mar argue that "the best expression of divine command morality and the best expression of natural law ethics . . . form a structural unity."[12] Aquinas himself counted obedience to divine commands as the highest virtue.[13]

On the Thomistic analysis, at least the minimal sense in which ethics is theistic is its appeal to creation. On this view, again, God is the one responsible for having made the world and created entities within that world with the particular natures that they have. Arthur Holmes, sounding like a natural lawyer, once wrote that "the biblical direction is rather that the creation bears witness to the moral law, that creational indicators point to good ends God intended in making us as he did, and that God's law is the law of creation."[14]

On Christian theologian John Wesley's view, the moral law, flowing from the fountain of God's love and goodness, will, if followed, contribute to well-being and happiness. Wesley saw that it was adapted to the nature of things as God created them. If the standard of morality depends on the nature and relations of things, then it must depend on God himself because those realities themselves are the works of God's hands. Moreover, since no account of human flourishing that does not include communion with God is complete, man's *summum bonum* is impossible apart from reconciliation and fellowship with God. Several classical theologians have recognized that the final end of human beings is union with God, an experience in which we will become co-lovers with God and enter into the love that exists between the three persons of the Trinity.

A question arises of how it is that human nature points to natural law. One stance says an understanding of what is good must be derived from an understanding of human nature; this has been called "derivationism." An alternative perspective is "inclinationism," a view like that of John Finnis, according to which one's grasp of basic goods is something immediate and self-evident and internal to the life of practical reason. Mark Murphy

subscribes to the “real identity thesis,” which claims that the insight into the good we have through our inclinations and the knowledge we have about human flourishing through our understanding of human nature represent two alternative ways of grasping the same goods. If he is right, then there is no need to choose between the options because a rapprochement between them can be effected.

This central focus on human nature occasionally raises a concern among those theorists convinced that there is something flawed or broken about human nature. Adherents, for example, of something in the vicinity of the doctrine of original sin, or perhaps even total depravity, are understandably reticent to accord too much authority to the deliverances of human nature. Even what those deliverances themselves are is complexified, potentially, by a fallen human condition that might skew perspectives, warp noetic faculties, and color our moral inferences. This concern recurs as natural law theories of various stripes are subjected to critical scrutiny.

For now, the point to emphasize from this all-too-quick synopsis of a central strand of Thomistic thought is that if God himself is responsible for having conferred on human beings their essential nature, then God could be argued to be at least mediately responsible for knowable moral truths derived from the natural law. In itself, this is not enough on which to construct a strong version of the moral argument for God’s existence; but it at least resides in the vicinity and may well function as a part of a more robust variant of theistic ethics that is a necessary ingredient of moral apologetics.

Duns Scotus: The Subtle Doctor

Another important medieval thinker, Duns Scotus, deserves mention. He agreed with Aquinas on several matters but not on the question of whether positive concepts about God can apply only analogously. Unlike Aquinas, he thought ascriptions of goodness or love to God are neither equivocal nor merely analogous. They are essentially univocal. This is not to say that humans are as loving or good as God is; God is, unlike humans, perfect and infinite. Nevertheless, there is an essential sameness of meaning when it

comes to such concepts. This is a matter that will recur in the history of the moral argument.

Scotus also demurred from Aquinas on the metaphysical matter of whether each substance can possess only one substantial form. Because he thought, contra Aquinas, that a substance can possess more than one form, this allowed for a quite robust theory of individuation. He held that in addition to human beings' sharing in their essential humanity, they also each possess individual forms. Scotus held that substances possess a "thisness," or *haecceity*. God creates persons with both a common human nature and a unique individual character. This is a crucial notion to bear in mind when we later talk about issues concerning human value, both in the aggregate and in individuals.

Scotus also seemed to endorse something of a libertarian view of free will, according to which the will has genuine options from which to choose. This does not entail arbitrary decisions; rather, we may have reasons for a variety of actions. Whichever choice we have, we can adduce reasons for it. But the reasons do not entail the choice as some "intellectualist" accounts would have it. Rather, our reasons do not determine us to do just one thing. There is a parallel in this regard, Scotus thought, with God, when he issues commands. Although some of God's commands are necessary, others may well be contingent. In Scotus's case, he thought the commands in the second tablet of the Decalogue were contingent. Whether or not he was right about that, the general point is an interesting one to consider. Some divine commands may be contingent but, like libertarian human choices, not arbitrary.

Following Anselm, Scotus also distinguished between two motivations within us, the *affection for justice* and the *affection for advantage*, although he took the distinction in a slightly different direction from that of Anselm. Scotus not only distinguished them but prioritized them, insisting that the former, the affection for justice, deserves primacy. The affection for justice is about pursuing the good, doing good for others, doing our duty, and such, whereas our affection for advantage is about assigning primacy to our own best interests. Our natural inclination is to give priority to advantage over justice, but morality dictates just the opposite, while carving out important space for both.

Because we may need to stifle or resist the affection for advantage on occasion, Scotus rejected the "eudaimonistic" conception of ethics that Aquinas took from Aristotle, in which the end of human life that guides moral decisions is simply happiness. As Evans puts it, "Paradoxically, the route to ultimate happiness requires me to value something more than my own happiness, at least when happiness is understood in temporal, this-worldly ways."[15] Scotus was a divine command theorist when it came to spelling out the requirements of justice. He avoided arbitrariness concerns by affirming that some moral truths are necessary truths that not even God can alter. But some moral obligations are made true by divine commands, commands that fit or are appropriate in relation to the good. The main difference from Aquinas is that Scotus thought that God has more discretion over what he commands than did Aquinas. Aquinas saw God's commands as fixed by God's understanding of what is good and good for us, given the natures he has given us. To use terms from earlier, Scotus would embrace the discretionary hypothesis, whereas Aquinas would reject it, a topic to be discussed in more detail later.

Ockham: The Venerable Inceptor

The last medieval to discuss for now, a contemporary of Scotus, is William of Ockham (ca. 1287–1347). Most have heard of "Ockham's Razor," a principle of simplicity—if two theories equally well explain the facts but one is simpler, opt for the simpler theory. Amazingly enough, it seems to be a quite good epistemic principle in a lot of areas—elliptical orbits free from Ptolemaic epicycles come to mind as a salient example. This important epistemic principle is traceable to Ockham, and it is a principle that is often useful in forming defensible theories in a range of disciplines. Sometimes an appeal to Ockham's Razor is called the principle of parsimony—the notion that we should exclude extraneous hypotheses and opt for simpler theories that explain what needs to be explained at least equally well. This matter will come up from time to time as we discuss both the moral argument and the case for moral realism on which moral arguments are based.

Less favorably, often associated with Ockham is a stance in ethics that has actually been named after him: that of "Ockhamism." This at least colloquially is taken to represent radical voluntarism, according to which morality is whatever God says it is. This position is an endorsement of the horn of the Euthyphro Dilemma that says that whatever God commands is moral in virtue of God's commanding it. Many call this "voluntarism," and we will follow suit. This notion of voluntarism can be a bit ambiguous, so we can take this occasion to make a useful distinction to help disambiguate it a bit.

Recall the Euthyphro Dilemma: Either God commands something because it is moral, or it is moral because God commands it. Sometimes the former is called a "guided will" theory, and often the latter is called a "pure will" account. Let us consider the "pure will" account for now: Something is moral because God commands it. Now, ethicists tend to distinguish between matters of the (moral) good and right, so the term "moral" might mean one or the other, or both. So the "pure will" account might mean moral goodness is what God wills or commands it to be, or that moral rightness (primarily moral duties) is what God wills or commands it to be, or both.

A radically voluntarist account would say God's will or commands dictate the content of both the good and the right. A voluntarist account of the moral good is axiological voluntarism; a voluntarist account of the right (moral duties) is deontic voluntarism, or divine command theory (DCT). So DCT, on this view, entails that moral duties come about as a result of divine commands. We have much sympathy for DCT, but we will not defend axiological voluntarism. For the purposes of our own account, we will confine the moral relevance of DCT to the matter of moral duties or obligations.

Ockhamism is often associated with radical voluntarism, in a couple of senses. One of those senses is thinking that voluntarism applies to both the good and the right, both axiological and deontic realities. The other sense is thinking of such voluntarism, in each case, as containing no essential constraints. So, in the case of moral goodness, if God were to say that torturing children for fun is good, then it would be good. In the case of moral rightness, if God were to command us to torture kids for fun, then doing so would be morally obligatory, in virtue of God's commanding it.

Set aside axiological voluntarism and consider now a voluntarist account of moral duties, divine command theory. Even though such an account is not radically voluntarist in the first sense, it remains vulnerable to the charge of making morality arbitrary. If there are no constraints on what God commands, then there are no limits on what God can command. This is the most notorious recurring charge against divine command theory. Sometimes such voluntarism goes by the name of "Ockhamism," named after Ockham, and this for a few reasons. One reason was Ockham's pivot from Thomism, shifting the focus away from God's mind or *nous* and toward God's will. A second reason was that some (in)famous phrases found in Ockham's work suggest there are no constraints on what God can command. This led plenty of interpreters of him to think that he was suggesting that God can licitly command acts that, apart from an express divine command, would count as adultery, murder, and the like, or that God might command someone to hate him (God).

In *Good God*, Jerry Walls and David Baggett characterized Ockham as a radical voluntarist in this second sense, suggesting that morality is whatever God says it is, before criticizing the view. John Hare, in a review of the book, argued that while such an interpretation is commonplace, a better understanding of Ockham is on offer. He directed readers to the magisterial, two-volume work of Marilyn McCord Adams on Ockham[16] and, even more, to the work by Lucan Freppert that she endorses.[17] A better understanding of Ockham, in Hare's words, is this:

> The command to not love God, though its content is possible in itself, is pragmatically incoherent (a practical contradiction) because it cannot be disobeyed; this is because to disobey it is already to love God: "The created will cannot elicit such an act during this time" (*Quodlibetal Questions* III.14). A content can be non-contradictory in itself but contradictory *as commanded*. This seems to be the view of the preponderance of Ockham's texts on the issue, in which he teaches that to obey God and to love God are the same thing. A content can also be non-contradictory as commanded, but contradictory as commanded *by God*.[18]

In light of these exegetical complexities, here is what we propose. We will use the phrase "radical voluntarism" to refer to an extension of voluntarism to both the good and the right and/or to a version of divine command theory that includes no constraints on God's commands whatsoever. Voluntarism with respect to moral goodness, axiological voluntarism, is a view that we will not discuss further, since it is a view we

reject wholesale (although we will argue for a different sort of dependence relation). When we discuss DCT, it will be the notion that God's commands generate moral obligations. Some divine command theories are radically voluntarist in the problematically arbitrary sense, but some are not, as we will see. In deference to work by scholars like Adams and Freppert, we will refrain from equating Ockhamism with radical voluntarism in either sense.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTER 2

This chapter covered five significant figures from the medieval era: Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham. Points about Augustine most germane to the moral argument include that the greatest good for human beings is God himself, the source of our truest and deepest joy and flourishing. Right living involves recognizing that some goods are higher than others and that we should love things in an appropriate way and to the right measure, neither too much nor too little, which requires the operation of God's grace. Augustine also rejected the Platonic notion that the empirical world, including the body, is inherently evil. He also intimated a notion that would develop subsequently that truth is independent of the intellectual activity of human beings but not of the intellectual activity of God. Regarding Anselm, what we took as his primary import for now was his greatest possible being methodology, an a priorist approach to describing God in terms of the great-making properties. This is an important aspect of the operative theology of our own analysis. Regarding Aquinas, we emphasized, among other things, his practice of natural law, a historically important variant of theistic ethics. Natural law comes in different forms, but theistic adaptations agree that God is the one responsible for having made the world and created entities within that world with the particular natures that they have. Regarding Scotus, he deployed a distinction from Anselm between affections for justice and those of advantage, arguing that the former should take primacy; affirmed that there is more than analogical language in our descriptions of God; emphasized not just human nature generally but the uniqueness of each person; and endorsed a divine command ethic that allowed for some of God's

commands to be contingent. Ockham is best known for something like radical voluntarism; opinions vary on whether this is exactly right. Even if this was not quite Ockham's own view, the notion that *all* of God's commands are contingent is an important view for consideration in the history of the moral argument and is likely a view susceptible to intractable arbitrariness objections.

1 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991), book 1, chap. 1.

2 Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity*, in *St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Arthur West Haddan, vol. 3 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, first series (Buffalo, 1887), 244.

3 Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 223.

4 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity or De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. Edmund Hill (New City, 1996), 118.

5 Alvin Plantinga, "How to Be an Anti-Realist," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 56, no. 1 (September 1982): 52.

6 C. Stephen Evans, *A History of Western Philosophy* (InterVarsity, 2018), 151.

7 Worth noting is that it is false that the ontological argument claims that "God exists" is an analytic truth. No existential assertion is analytic, and construing it as such would make it impossible to assert that God really does exist. By the same token, current versions of the ontological argument (like Plantinga's) do not try to define God into existence but rather are modal arguments asserting that it is possible that God exists, from which metaphysical possibility it follows that God does exist in light of certain axioms from modal logic. Thus, the old claim that the ontological argument proves only that if there is a God, then God exists necessarily, fails to take cognizance of the modal versions. Such a deficit in understanding the ontological argument often looms surprisingly large in the rejection of grounding moral values in God.

[8] See Richard Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (Continuum, 2006). Davies entertains reservations about attributing the quality of moral goodness to God, but we do not share his reservations. See *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 54–58.

[9] C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 59. See as well Mark Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 2–3; and Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II.94.2.

[10] Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, 61.

[11] Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*.

[12] James G. Hanink and Gary R. Mar, "What Euthyphro Couldn't Have Said," *Faith and Philosophy* 4, no. 3 (1987): 254.

[13] Evans actually considers Aquinas a divine command theorist, albeit one who rejects the "discretionary hypothesis," a topic we will discuss under "A Problematic Disjunction" in chap. 12.

[14] Arthur Holmes, *Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions*, 2nd ed. (InterVarsity, 2007), 66.

[15] Evans, *History*, 218.

[16] Marilyn McCord Adams, *William of Ockham*, 2 vols. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

[17] Lucan Freppert, *The Basis of Morality According to William Ockham* (Franciscan Herald Press, 1988).

[18] John Hare, "Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, June 19, 2011, https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/good-god-the-theistic-foundations-of-morality/.

3

Early Modern Figures

We can think of the early modern period as spanning the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. The transition from the medievals to the moderns is marked by several significant events, including the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the scientific revolution. Among the results of these significant cultural transformations was a loss of confidence in religious authorities, a rise in humanism, and a greater emphasis on efficient causes over formal and final causes.[1] In this chapter, we will direct our attention mainly to seven prominent figures from the period.

Before getting started, a few words are in order about the Reformation. Both Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564), central Reformation figures, wrote about issues relevant to the moral argument. Of course, they do not speak for all Protestants, much less all Christians or theists, but both Luther and Calvin seemed, on the whole, to opt for the voluntarist horn of the Euthyphro Dilemma. Unqualified voluntarism leads to insuperable problems, as seen, but for now our point is simply to record the fact. In particular, the doctrines of free will and unconditional election functioned to animate their convictions. Free will was, for Luther, a "tangled labyrinth," and human dependence on God's grace vitiates human autonomy in the fallen condition. This makes God exclusively responsible for choosing the elect, a view that Luther recognized could seem counterintuitive; but he thought theology required it. He wrote the following about unconditional election:

> Doubtless it gives the greatest possible offence to common sense or natural reason, that God, Who is proclaimed as being full of mercy and goodness, and so on, should of His own mere will abandon, harden, and damn men, as though He delighted in the sins and great eternal torments of such poor wretches. It seems an iniquitous, cruel, intolerable thought to think of God, and it is

> this that has been a stumbling block to so many great men down the ages. And who would not stumble in it? I have stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished I had never been made a man.[2]

God is not, though, by Luther's lights, unjust, for "God is He for Whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule and standard," for "nothing is on a level with it or above it, but it is itself the rule for all things." He went on to insist that "what God wills is not right because He ought, or was bound, so to will; on the contrary, what takes place must be right, because He so wills it."[3] A robustly voluntarist view indeed!

Likewise with Calvin, who thought this one fact, if nothing else, should preclude anyone from questioning God's justice for condemning someone to hell on the basis of his will alone: "His will is, and rightly ought to be, the cause of all things that are."[4] Although Calvin disavowed that embracing such a view was to advocate "the fiction of 'absolute right' or a 'lawless god' who is a law unto himself," his view remains a robust expression of voluntarism with respect to morality. Although we retain strong reservations about radical voluntarism, we resonate with the motivation to see God as somehow foundational to moral truth.

René Descartes

René Descartes (1596–1650) was a brilliant French philosopher and mathematician. A vitally important early modern figure, his epistemic starting point—the justly famous "I think, therefore I am"—has been hailed by many as a definitive move toward an individualist approach to knowing what we do. Even in the process of doubting, he argued, one has reason to believe that one exists, at least minimally as a mind, a thinking (doubting) entity. Most philosophers since have recognized that the epistemic standard of certainty that he upheld is unrealistically and impracticably high. Very few beliefs can pass such a test, except for a relatively few internal to our own heads. Efforts to build a bridge from such "Cartesian" (or apodictic) certainty about some internal beliefs (like "I appear to see a tree" or "I am feeling pain") to the external world invariably sacrifice certainty in the process. A significant takeaway from his work thus comes from this very

failure of his. The insight to be gleaned is the need to distinguish knowledge from complete certainty and not to hanker after such certainty as a necessary condition of knowledge. This is a useful lesson to bear in mind as we subject arguments from natural theology to critical scrutiny.

Regarding ethics in particular, in his "Dedicatory Letter to the Sorbonne," introducing his famous *Meditations*, Descartes wrote about the vital role that belief in God and the soul play in providing a robust incentive for morality. He aimed to show the reality of God and the soul by natural reason. Since in this life the rewards offered to vice are often greater than the rewards of virtue, few people would prefer what is right to what is expedient if they did not fear God or have the expectation of an afterlife. This is, admittedly, less a moral apologetic than, at first approximation, a claim that we need belief in God and an afterlife to motivate virtue.

Descartes also made bold claims about God himself, not just belief in God. For example, he was a philosopher and theist who believed that even mathematical and logical truths are contingent (or at least not necessarily necessary) because of God's ability to alter their content. This is why he has been characterized as a "universal possibilist," someone who believes that anything is possible as long as God wills it. For example, he wrote that God lays down the mathematical truths we call eternal just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom, and that they depend on him completely. Such dependence is thought by Descartes to entail control; later thinkers who distinguish these, as we will see, contrast with Descartes.

Descartes wrote that it is

> useless to inquire how God could from all eternity bring it about that it should be untrue that twice four is eight . . . ; for I admit that that cannot be understood by us. Yet since on the other hand I correctly understand that nothing in any category of causation can exist which does not depend on God, and that it would have been easy for him so to appoint that we human beings should not understand how these very things could be otherwise than they are, it would be irrational to doubt concerning that which we correctly understand because of that which we do not understand and perceive no need to understand.[5]

Three points for now about Descartes bear emphasis. First, he saw the practical connections between morality and its authority, on the one hand, and whether there is an afterlife, on the other. This is an issue that will recur numerous times in the history of the moral argument. Second, he saw the vital importance not just of the afterlife and of God but also of the character

of God. He thought nothing less than the classical or "Anselmian" conception of theism is philosophically powerful enough to merit our allegiance. An adequate theology is vital for solving problems associated with theistic ethics emanating from the Euthyphro Dilemma, and doing so is a crucial part of moral apologetics. Third, Descartes apprehended the need to acknowledge God as the ground of all reality, in one way or another. Whatever the merits of his ultravoluntarism, it seemed motivated by a felt recognition to see God function as the ultimate ontological foundation of all that there is.

Blaise Pascal

The life of Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) overlapped with that of Descartes. Pascal, too, was a mathematical genius. Before dying at the age of thirty-nine, he was reputed by many to be the leading thinker of Europe. Over the course of his life, his focus shifted from mathematics to philosophy. He experienced a dramatic conversion to the Christian faith, an experience he referred to cryptically as his "night of fire." Afterward he would dedicate most of his intellectual energies to arguing for the truth of Christianity. He thought that none of us can rationally ignore the existentially urgent question of whether there is an afterlife. For him this question makes a huge difference, not only in how we should understand morality but also in how we should approach our entire lives. In his famous *Pensées*—the posthumously organized notes he was compiling in his preparation to write his Christian apologetic—he wrote, "The immortality of the soul is something of such vital importance to us, affecting us so deeply, that one must have lost all feeling not to care about knowing the facts of the matter. All our actions and thoughts must follow such different paths, according to whether there is hope of eternal blessings or not, that the only possible way of acting with sense and judgment is to decide our course of action in the light of this point, which ought to be our ultimate objective."[6]

Although Allan Bloom once wrote that everyone in France is either Cartesian (driven by reason) or Pascalian (driven by faith), Pascal and Descartes both affirmed that morality, God, and the afterlife are inextricably linked. In pointing to the need for ultimate correspondence between

happiness and holiness, they were concerned with nothing less than the full rationality of morality, a recurring theme in the history of the moral argument. It so happened that Pascal accorded to epistemology a more expansive scope than what reason narrowly construed can encompass. In this way he anticipated figures like John Henry Newman, William James, and others.[7]

John Locke

The great English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) echoed the role that divine reward and punishment plays in matters of moral motivation. The forthrightness with which he emphasized the centrality of reward and punishment has elicited from some the accusation that he thought moral motivation involved nothing else. This attitude can seem more about being prudential than actually being moral. Another take on his emphasis here is possible and plausible, however. Locke seemed to be putting his finger on a crucial element in the moral enterprise when he insisted on an ultimate reckoning and balancing of the scales of justice. Unless ultimate reality itself is committed to justice, many of our deepest hopes for the rectification of wrongs and redemption of sufferings will be in vain.

In fairness to Locke, moreover, his discussion of moral motivation was more nuanced and textured than is often acknowledged. In addition to fear of punishment or hope for reward, he also ascribed central importance to acting in accord with conscience. In his more mature work, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke reiterated that moral law functions as a way of ensuring obedience. Humans can appreciate the intrinsic goodness of virtue, even its appeal, but this is often not enough to motivate virtuous behavior. “The philosophers indeed showed the beauty of virtue: they set her off so as drew men’s eyes and approbation to her. The generality could not refuse her their esteem and commendation; but still turned their backs on her, and forsook her, as a match not for their turn.”[8]

To remedy this problem, on Locke’s view, God attaches clear and explicit sanctions to ensure that the virtuous course of action will always be the more attractive option:

> [Virtue] has another relish and efficacy to persuade men, that if they live well here, they shall be happy hereafter. Open their eyes upon the endless, unspeakable joys of another life, and their hearts will find something solid and powerful to move them. The view of heaven and hell will cast a slight upon the short pleasures and pains of this present state, and give attractions and encouragements to virtue which reason and interest, and the care of ourselves, cannot but allow and prefer. Upon this foundation, and upon this only, morality stands firm, and may defy all competition. This makes it more than a name; a substantial good, worth all our aims and endeavors; and thus the gospel of Jesus Christ has delivered it to us.[9]

George Berkeley

A radical British idealist, George Berkeley (1685–1753) proposed the notion that what we think are material objects are actually ideas in the mind and thus cannot exist without being perceived. What motivated Berkeley was a theological conviction that everything depends on God; his stance happens, of course, to be a particularly insistent variant of such a notion. Whatever the merits or drawbacks of his version of radical idealism, the theological rationale, or something in its vicinity, functions at the heart of moral apologetics. Subsequent luminaries in the history of the moral argument (like A. E. Taylor) were also in the British idealist tradition, though often less radical than Berkeley.

Interestingly enough, Berkeley was convinced that affirming the independent existence of the world apart from God would result in worshiping matter. It would involve attributing to the physical world traits reserved for God alone, like absolute ontological independence. Although his solution may not be the only or best way to avoid such a problem, his prediction that materialists would eventually have few qualms about attributing to the empirical world qualities traditionally reserved for deity alone proved prescient.

Regarding morality in particular, the empiricist Berkeley (like the rationalist Gottfried Leibniz [1646–1716]) thought that all God does is right and just. In Leibniz's case, he pushed the point that the actual world is the best possible world because of God's perfect nature, a view parodied in Voltaire's *Candide*. In Berkeley's case, he thought all of God's commands are meant to produce the best consequences, so we can use our minds to determine their content. We might say at the normative level he was something of a utilitarian, while at the metaethical level he remained a

theistic ethicist, because what constitutes the best overall consequence is a function of the world as God designed it. Theism can augment utilitarianism by furnishing an answer to the question of why one ought to, say, maximize utility.[10]

Bishop Butler

In a memorable series of carefully crafted and argued sermons, the English Anglican bishop and philosopher Joseph Butler (1692–1752) attempted to refute the egoism found in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Hobbes's determinism and materialism seemed to entail a view of human beings as invariably guided by their strongest desires, rendering them violent and power hungry. This left little room for morality more classically construed.

By offering a sustained argument against psychological egoism, Butler attempted to make room for genuine altruism and benevolence. Butler argued that human motivation is quite a bit more complex than Hobbes thought. The mind features a whole taxonomy of impulses, an organized hierarchy of disparate inclinations and principles, some altogether unselfish. In properly organized minds, such impulses are controlled by the principles of self-love and benevolence. The highest practical authority of all in the human mind is God-given moral conscience, which dictates that one ought to promote the general happiness and personal happiness. Often these two aims largely coincide in the present life; transparently self-centered people, for example, tend to sow the seeds of their own downfall.

Admittedly on occasion the wicked seem for a time to prosper. It is God who guarantees ultimate perfect harmony of virtue and self-interest, Butler thought. Interestingly enough, he even argued that humans are not *too* concerned with issues of self-interest, but rather are not concerned *enough*. He pointed out several ways in which greater attention paid to what is legitimately in one's long-term interests enables one to see that showing more respect for others and caring with more empathy leads to a better quality of life.

Thomas Reid

Thomas Reid (1710–1796) was an important thinker in the history of the moral argument, but before discussing him, a quick word about John Wesley (1703–1791), a British Anglican instrumental in founding Methodism. On Wesley's view, the moral law, flowing from the fountain of God's love and goodness, will, if followed, make for our well-being and happiness. Wesley was convinced that it was adapted to the nature of things as God created them. If the standard depends on the nature and relations of things, then it must depend on God if those things themselves, with all of their relations, are the works of God's hands. Moreover, Wesley thought, since no account of human flourishing is complete that does not include communion with God, man's *summum bonum* is impossible apart from reconciliation and fellowship with God.

In contrast with Calvin and Luther, Wesley harbored grave misgivings about the doctrine of unconditional election. He understood biblical conceptions of election more along communal lines than individualist ones and endorsed the notion of prevenient grace that makes possible genuine human volition to accept God's offer of salvation despite our fallen condition. By such means he circumvented some of the thornier challenges to God's essential nature of love posed by more rigid doctrines of predestination. That said, he wrote that he was theologically but a "hair's breadth" from his more Augustinian brethren. In the medieval debate between the intellectualists and voluntarists concerning which has primacy, God's will or nature, Wesley wrote, "It seems, then, that the whole difficulty arises from considering God's will as distinct from God: otherwise it vanishes away. For none can doubt but God is the cause of the law of God. But the will of God is God Himself. It is God considered as willing thus or thus. Consequently, to say that the will of God, or that God Himself, is the cause of the law, is one and the same thing."[11] Wesley seemed to think that the Euthyphro challenge was something of a false dilemma. The only way to countenance radical voluntarism is to sever it from the character of God, which struck Wesley as a serious mistake that leads to a view like unconditional predestination.

Born seven years after Wesley was Thomas Reid, a central figure of the Scottish Enlightenment. Reid offered a few arguments in support of the aforementioned "coincidence thesis," the coincidence of well-being and virtue. His first argument wasn't that they are necessarily coextensive but

rather that they are bound together in various important ways. In the process he made it clear that he saw virtue and well-being as distinct. The way to secure their coincidence, despite this, is by positing the existence of a benevolent deity. As Reid put it, “While the world is under a wise and benevolent administration, it is impossible, that any man should, in the issue, be a loser by doing his duty. Every man, therefore, who believes in God, while he is careful to do his duty, may safely leave the care of his happiness to Him who made him.”[12]

Terence Cuneo points out that Reid held that the coincidence thesis lies deep in the moral life. Reid thought it a virtuous coincidence that the moral life is, or is at least likely to be, good on the whole for the virtuous agent. At the same time, Reid recognized that certain experiences of evil can shake this conviction. Cuneo adds that “Reid sees no way to defend the coincidence of virtue and well-being apart from supposing that the world is under benevolent administration. There is an important sense, then, in which Reid’s ethical views are ineliminably theistic.”[13]

Reid was convinced that genuine virtue requires being committed to the moral life for its own sake, not for some reward. Importantly, though, he saw no way to make sense of that commitment apart from holding “that there is a God who is just and benevolent in the administration of the world, ensuring that an agent’s virtue and good on the whole coincide if not in this life, then in the next.” As Reid put it, “Virtue is his [i.e., God’s] care. Its votaries are under his protection & guardianship.”[14] Unlike Joseph Butler, who engaged skeptics of the coincidence thesis in an effort to change their minds, Reid thought a commitment to that thesis, though virtuous, natural, and intuitive, goes beyond the evidence in some sense. Another step was needed before it could become fully evidentially significant. It was for Immanuel Kant, born just fourteen years after Reid, that these considerations would provide the material for an argument for God’s existence. To Kant, perhaps the best-known moral apologist of all, we at last turn to round out this chapter.

Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was arguably the first great proponent of the moral argument. Owing perhaps, at least in part, to his strong focus on authoritative moral duties, he was the first to articulate the moral argument in elaborate fashion, although, as we have seen, there were several significant precursors. He is well known for writing in his *Critique of Practical Reason* that two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe the more often and the more intensely the mind of thought is drawn to them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within. He offered two main moral arguments for God's existence. Here is a discursive formulation of his performative *argument from grace*:

1. Morality requires us to achieve a standard too exacting and demanding to meet on our own without some sort of outside assistance.
2. Exaggerating human capacities, lowering the moral demand, or finding a secular form of assistance aren't likely to be adequate for the purpose of closing the moral gap.
3. Divine assistance is sufficient to close the gap.
4. Therefore, rationality dictates that we must postulate God's existence.[15]

This argument pertains to the possibility of the moral life; if *ought implies can*, then the requirements of morality, if they are to be met, have to be within our reach. With God's help, and only with God's help, they are. This is the first half of "Kantian moral faith": reasonable faith that God enables us to fulfill the moral law.

Later we will extend that argument to underscore how God's grace can meet our need not just for a measure of moral transformation but also for forgiveness and even complete moral transformation. We will argue that by thus extending this argument from grace, we can actually deploy the moral argument to argue for something distinctively Christian and not merely generically theistic.

Here's Kant's other argument, the *moral argument from providence*:

1. Full rational commitment to morality requires that morality is a rationally stable enterprise.

2. In order for morality to be a rationally stable enterprise, it must feature ultimate correspondence between happiness and virtue.
3. There is no reason to think that such correspondence obtains unless God exists.
4. Therefore, rationality dictates the postulation of God's existence.[16]

This argument pertains to the *coincidence thesis*, discussed in various forms in Locke, Descartes, Pascal, Reid, and Butler. It pertains to the idea that virtue and ultimate well-being coincide, which is the other half of Kantian moral faith. Kant wanted to emphasize not just the issue of happiness but also the moral issue of deserving to be happy; there is something about the coincidence of virtue and well-being that struck him as profoundly right, and on this basis he formulated a variant of the moral argument for God's existence.

Kant is notorious for arguing in the *First Critique* that theoretical efforts to demonstrate God's existence fail, but his *Second Critique* augmented that picture. Following the likes of Palmquist, Hare, and Ameriks, we see Kant there according primacy to the practical. Taking the inference to God as regulative merely warrants acting as if God exists; but taking it as constitutive, as Kant thought his practical argument made possible, warrants believing that God actually exists. We will discuss Kant in greater detail in a later chapter.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTER 3

This chapter quickly surveyed contributions to the moral argument from seven early modern figures after a brief mention of the Protestant Reformers Luther and Calvin—namely, Descartes, Pascal, Locke, Berkeley, Butler, Reid, and Kant. The contemporaneous Frenchmen Descartes and Pascal both saw the relevance of the afterlife to fundamental questions of the moral quest. Berkeley was drawn to a consequentialist normative theory but also to a larger theistic framework, and Butler argued that it is God who guarantees ultimate perfect harmony of virtue and self-interest. Both Locke and Reid were drawn to an early version of the coincidence thesis, which

set the stage for Kant. Kant offered a few variants of the moral argument, one pertaining to the matter of transformation by God's grace and the other predicated on the coincidence thesis. Brief mention was made as well of how Wesley stood in the broadly Reformed tradition while differentiating himself in a few respects from Luther and Calvin. At times Wesley sounded like a natural lawyer, but at other times he intimated that the distinction between the voluntarists and intellectualists was artificial.

1 Aristotle distinguished between four types of causes. The material cause is the stuff something is made of, the formal cause is its design or shape, the efficient cause is the agent that brings it into existence, and the final cause is its purpose or goal.

2 Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Revell, 1957), 217.

3 Luther, *Bondage*, 29.

4 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Westminster, 1961), 3.23.2.

5 "Reply to Objections to Meditations VI," in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. E. Haldane and C. Ross (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2:251, quoted in Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Marquette University Press, 1980), 96, 101.

6 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford University Press, 1995), 143.

7 See William J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Cornell University Press, 2006).

8 John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. I. T. Ramsey (Stanford University Press, 1958), 70.

9 Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity*, 70.

10 Of course, the theist can be challenged with the question, Why obey God? This is an important query for theistic ethics discussed later in the book (the "prior obligation" objection to DCT). John Stuart Mill himself would later countenance an adjacent possibility when responding to the charge that utilitarianism is a "godless doctrine."

[11] John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Baker, 1986), 5:441.

[12] Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, intro. B. Brody (MIT Press, 1969), 256.

[13] Terence Cuneo, "Duty, Goodness, and God in Reid's Moral Philosophy," in *Reid on Ethics*, ed. Sabine Roeser (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 256.

[14] Thomas Reid, *Practical Ethics: Being Lectures and Papers on Natural Religion, Self-Government, Natural Jurisprudence, and the Law of Nations*, ed. K. Haakonnssen (Princeton University Press, 1990), 120.

[15] Much credit here goes to John Hare for providing resources and language to formulate Kant's argument so concisely. See his *Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* (Clarendon, 1997).

[16] Kant gave this argument in the Dialectic of the *Critique of Practical Reason* and at the beginning of *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and the end of the *First* and *Third Critiques*.

4

Late Moderns

Often the start of late modernity is marked by the French Revolution of 1789. This chapter will direct attention to a couple dozen important moral apologists born in the nineteenth century. Some of these thinkers did work relevant to the moral argument in the early twentieth century, but this is quite all right since the modern period often extends to the end of World War II in 1945. We will not greatly elaborate on each figure; we will discuss a few at greater length (namely, John Henry Newman and A. E. Taylor), and we will have quite a bit more to say about Henry Sidgwick in part 3.

John Henry Newman

John Henry Newman (1801–1890) was a significant British figure during the nineteenth century. He exemplified the fact that the history of apologetics is very much a story about epistemology. His rich epistemological insights served as the foundation of his moral argument. His broad epistemology and expansive empiricism recognized that we are more than narrow logic choppers. He likened the quest for truth to a vaulted ceiling that ingeniously throws its weight in a variety of directions. We gradually come to the conclusions we do through a complicated process of considering a great number of evidences, not just through tight discursive analyses. He wrote against the background of British empiricism, particularly that of Locke, Hume, and Mill, all of whom, by Newman's lights, insisted on too restrictive a range of evidence in their theorizing.

Newman thought that a broader empiricism would take into account the phenomenology of conscience, in particular, which can prove telling,

making possible what he called a *real assent* and sense of deep assurance. His most important work containing his moral argument is *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, published in 1870.[1] Selecting conscience was strategic, largely attributable to the nineteenth century, as he claimed in a letter to William Brownlow. It was a potentially persuasive starting point in his argument, tactically chosen in order to get the argument off the ground, since he figured it was something that most would admit. Newman desired to make an impact and be persuasive, and he didn't think it would be effective to offer evidential considerations that were nonstarters. A practitioner at heart, Newman was careful not to ignore widely accessible evidence that's really there, and he also wished to cast an argument that can appeal to the unlearned just as much as to the scholar.

Put succinctly, he argued that our consciences, particularly our feelings of guilt, lead us to conclude that God exists. Feelings of conscience are often directed toward fellow human beings, but sometimes our feelings of guilt or shame, which we take as evidence to suggest that we have offended someone, lack an appropriate human target. If such feelings are appropriate, they must then have a nonhuman target. Our feelings of responsibility, shame, and fear emanating from our conscience imply that there is one to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims on us we fear. Guilt sensitizes us to the impediment of sin in the way of fellowship with others, including God.

Like other luminaries from the history of the moral argument, Newman thought that a vitally important way in which to become aware of the divine is our sense of moral obligation. Human beings seem epistemically equipped to identify intimations of conscience and their source as an external admonition. Conscience is less a rule of right conduct than a sanction of right conduct, and this feature of its phenomenology makes morality personal:

> Conscience has an intimate bearing on our affections and emotions leading us to reverence and awe, hope and fear, especially fear. Wrongdoing generates a lively sense of responsibility and guilt. These various perturbations of mind which are characteristic of a bad conscience, and may be very considerable—self-reproach, poignant shame, haunting remorse, chill dismay at the prospect of the future—and their contraries, when the conscience is good, as real though less forcible, self-approval, inward peace, lightness of heart, and the like—these emotions constitute a specific difference between conscience and our other intellectual senses—common sense, good sense, sense of expedience, taste, sense of honour, and the like.[2]

He thought the moral deliverances of general revelation are predominantly negative, making the gospel of Christ such good news. He also took the emotional dimensions of moral phenomenology to point to a personal Agent behind the moral law. What stirs emotions are not inanimate things but persons. “If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear.”[3]

For Newman, conscience functions as the aboriginal Vicar of Christ. Special revelation amplifies and augments the truths at which natural religion hints. In the fullness of time, he thought, God finally revealed the fuller truth, effecting a glorious inversion, making the minor note the major theme: the possibility of forgiveness, the prospect of moral transformation, and hope for salvation. God is not just a Judge but a loving Father. The Holy is not merely, to use Rudolf Otto’s later language, *mysterium* and *tremendum*—dark, mysterious, unapproachable—but also *fascinans*: lovely, beautiful, gracious, charming.[4] For Newman, then, the moral argument functions impeccably as a prelude and prolegomenon to proclamation of the gospel of Christ.

Henry Sidgwick

Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900) would identify the “dualism of practical reason” as a problem confronting the ethical enterprise. This is the tension between one’s own happiness and the happiness of others, or between rational self-love and rational benevolence. Sidgwick thought these impulses equally legitimate, yet on occasion they encounter an intractable tension. The full rationality of morality requires the resolution of this dualism, but Sidgwick did not see such a rapprochement as forthcoming. The only potential solution he could see was a theistic one, according to which a providential God ensures their harmony, but Sidgwick himself refused to follow this path. Nevertheless, his writings include the seeds for such a moral argument, predicated on the full rationality of morality.[5] We will lay out much more of Sidgwick’s view in chapter 15.

William James

Born four years after Sidgwick was William James (1842–1910), whose work would eventually offer several resources that a moral apologist can deploy. He saw it as irrational to embrace a rule of reasoning that precludes finding truth that is really there to be found, and he argued that the category of moral regret is a bad fit with a naturalistic worldview. Like Newman and others, his was an expansive empiricism that included considering the evidential value of relational, aesthetic, and ethical deliverances. Concerning moral skeptics, for example, he had this to say:

> The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will. Are our moral preferences true or false, or are they only odd biological phenomena, making things good or bad for us, but in themselves indifferent? How can your pure intellect decide? If your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one. . . . Moral skepticism can no more be refuted or proved by logic than intellectual skepticism can. When we stick to it that there is truth (be it of either kind), we do so with our whole nature, and resolve to stand or fall by the results. The skeptic with his whole nature adopts the doubting attitude; but which of us is the wiser, Omniscience only knows.[6]

Arthur Balfour

British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour (1848–1930), a contemporary of James, also gave Gifford Lectures that touched on the moral argument, and he similarly recognized the moral deficiencies of naturalism. He was particularly intent on underscoring the ways in which deflationary analyses of moral values and duties are better at explaining them *away* than at actually explaining them. The published version of his first Gifford Lectures, *Theism and Humanism*, was one of C. S. Lewis's ten favorite books.[7]

William Sorley

This section slows down and zeroes in on William Sorley (1855–1935) specifically and his work's broad application to our current cultural and apologetic milieu. In 1900, Sorley succeeded his old professor Henry

Sidgwick at Cambridge, a post he held until his retirement in 1933. Not a Christian himself, Sidgwick said it was a relief to have a Christian philosopher replace him. Sorley gave his Gifford Lectures in 1914 and 1915. They were later published under the title *Moral Values and the Idea of God*. J. H. Muirhead wrote of this volume that he could remember the sense of freshness and power the book gave them all at the time.[8] Sorley represents a philosophy and apologetic approach that is gentlemanly, rigorous, scholarly, and irenic. By examining his unique approach, we discover a model of excellence to follow in thinking through evidential questions about God's existence.

A Moral Philosopher

As an apologist, Sorley argued that there are good philosophical reasons to take belief in God seriously. Yet, like British idealist philosopher A. E. Taylor in this regard, he wasn't likely to call himself an apologist, preferring instead to be known as simply a philosopher. Even then, perhaps, apologetics carried unpalatable implications in certain quarters, such as the ranks of professional philosophers who saw apologetics as more about advocacy than reason. Sorley wanted to be known more as a truth seeker than a partisan, and he saw arguments more as lifelong friends than as tools in an arsenal for purposes of persuasion. Because he took evidence and argument seriously, he was averse to seeing them reduced to divisive weapons of intellectual warfare.

What struck those closest to Sorley was how seriously he took ethical issues, not just as a theoretician but also as a practitioner. G. F. Stout depicted Sorley with descriptions of his vigor, ability, cordial friendliness, and lively wit—a "most loyal and devoted friend," a man of "strong and warm feelings." What struck Stout most in Sorley's character was "the consistent way in which he was guided both in his private and public life by moral standards and practices."[9] This ensured a resonance between Sorley's life and work, because so much of his professional work revolved around issues of ethics and morality. For Sorley, morality provides a touchstone of reality, and his life demonstrated that he took the moral project seriously, not only investigating the moral argument but also embodying it.

What Is Good?

Much of what preoccupied Sorley's attention was the issue of moral values, and a question that arises concerning moral goodness is, What sorts of things can be called "good"? Nowadays, a secular trend is afoot to explain morality by implicitly blurring lines between moral and nonmoral goodness. Atheist Sam Harris suggests that since we know pain is bad and pleasure is good, on this foundation we can construct our ethical systems. DePauw University philosopher and atheist Erik Wielenberg speaks of how the intrinsic nature of intense suffering renders it "bad," offering us all the moral reasons we need to avoid it for ourselves and others. This way of explaining ethics, however, risks explaining away some of its most important features.

Sorley recognized with prescience that the category of intrinsic moral value rightly applies only to persons. Surely it's bad to experience excruciating pain, but it's not morally bad as such. The distinction here is between nonmoral badness and moral evil. Kant recognized this distinction, insisting that the latter is the more distinctively moral category, which is closely related to his insistence that the only truly good thing is a *good will*—a feature of persons—and also related to his point that morality is less about happiness per se than about deserving to be happy. To conflate nonmoral badness with moral evil contributes to quite a bit of confusion nowadays and is a real weakness in a number of contemporary efforts to construct a moral theory, however rhetorically effective at garnering adherents.

Sorley, to his credit, saw clearly the need to avoid this mistake, keep alive the vital organic connection between moral goodness and persons, and allow moral values in all their profundity and mystery—their authority, their beauty, their compelling nature—to do their work.

Lotze's Dictum

Sorley arguably developed one of the most sophisticated moral arguments prior to recent times. Much of what empowered Sorley's analysis was that he thought it incumbent to make the basis of our theory of reality as broad as possible and to realize that it will lack breadth and completeness

if moral facts and ideas are excluded from the outset. The result is a truncated picture of reality. Sorley thus argued strongly for attentiveness to such data and a deep inquiry into its evidential significance.

In most systems of philosophy, ethical inquiry gets postponed until questions of metaphysics—What is the nature of reality?—are settled, but Sorley thought this to be a radical mistake. Instead, he sided with "Lotze's dictum," which says the true beginning of metaphysics lies in ethics. Hermann Lotze's conviction here is that ethical ideas about value or worth hold a certain primacy for the interpretation of reality—metaphysics ought to be founded on ethics, objectively construed.[10]

On this point, Sorley stood foursquare against the stance of atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell, who warned against any strategy that aims to figure out the nature of reality by considering morality:

> Driven from the particular sciences, the belief that the notions of good and evil must afford a key to the understanding of the world has sought a refuge in philosophy. But even from this last refuge, if philosophy is not to remain a set of pleasing dreams, this belief must be driven forth. It is a commonplace that happiness is not best achieved by those who seek it directly; and it would seem that the same is true of the good. In thought, at any rate, those who forget good and evil and seek only to know the facts are more likely to achieve good than those who view the world through the distorting medium of their own desires.[11]

Here, Russell's dismissal of the evidential significance of morality was more than a little premature. The idea residing at the very foundation of moral arguments for God's existence is that morality provides a veridical window of insight into reality.

The moral argument is based on this powerful idea: A close examination of morality in its distinctive features, true to our rich moral experiences, functions evidentially to provide reasons to think the merely temporal and finite goods of this world are neither the only nor the most important goods there are to secure. Moral values and duties radically impinge on us and this world by, it would seem, pointing beyond this world. They suggest the way the world ought to and one day will be, most assuredly not the way it already is. Sorley embraced the evidential value of ethics to inquiries into metaphysics.

An Imaginative Apologetic

As a philosopher, Sorley had a refined aesthetic and imaginative taste. His reading wasn't myopic or provincial; it included not only philosophy but also a wide range of great literature. Moreover, he possessed prodigious literary ability himself, a trait he passed down to his son Charles. Sorley and his wife, Janetta, would have four children, two sons and two daughters. Their highly gifted eldest son, Charles Hamilton Sorley, was a noted World War I poet. William once compared his own achievements with those of his son's: "He will be remembered when I am a dead and forgotten scholar—there is in his poetry the *truth* I sought, and beauty such as I have never found."[12]

Sorley knew that human beings aren't merely mechanically rational, which likely contributed to his draw to an argument that appeals to both the intellect and the affect—the full range, in fact, of our relational, aesthetic, and imaginative faculties. Nor was he alone in this regard; the fertile history of moral apologetics is filled with profound thinkers who could see that our efforts to apprehend reality in all of its fullness require a broad approach to knowledge and keen, intentional attentiveness to the expansive array of evidence on offer—moral and relational, aesthetic and discursive. John Henry Newman, Clement Webb, William James, and others saw that this requires openness to an interdisciplinary approach. A. E. Taylor echoed this insight:

> Plato was so much more than the author of a philosophical theory; he was one of the world's supreme dramatists, with the great dramatist's insight into a vast range of human character and experience, an insight only possible to a nature itself quickly and richly responsive to a world of suggestion which narrower natures of the specialist type miss. By moralists I do not mean primarily men who have devoted themselves to the elaboration of ethical systems, the Aristotles, or even the Kants, but men who have lived richly and deeply and thought as well as lived, the Platos, Augustines, Dostoevskys, and their fellows.[13]

Sorley, like Taylor, like John Henry Newman, like Clement Webb, could see that the head and heart must come together, that philosophy and literature must converge, that an inquiry into truth requires the full panoply of our resources.

The Problem of Evil

When Sorley said we must be attentive to the moral evidence, he wasn't blind to the suffering of the world. He saw it clearly as a sign that something was awry and in desperate need of fixing. There was nothing Pollyannaish about his approach. He wrote his Gifford Lectures in the throes of World War I, sending early chapters to his son Charles, who was in the middle of the fight. Sorley acutely recognized that ignoring the sufferings and evils in the world wasn't an option. He couldn't merely speak of the evidential power of the moral law; he had to acknowledge and somehow come to terms with the broken and dysfunctional (dysteleological) elements in the world, the sense in which the world clearly isn't yet what it ought to be.

Then something happened that brought the problem of evil home in the most personal way possible. The horrific news arrived that Charles had been killed in the Battle of Loos. There was already an inextricable connection between Sorley's work and life, but now it became a dramatic, dynamic collision of heartrending loss and his life's work. His abiding faith despite grieving his son's tragic premature death resonates on every page of *Moral Values*. The problem of evil was no mere academic discussion for Sorley; it couldn't have been a more gripping existential reality. The moral law is real, he was convinced, but equally undeniable is evil. The moral evidence vividly contains both intractable realities.

Sorley came to see that this very recognition makes sense of a dispute between Kant and Hume. Kant's formulation of the moral argument suggests that the moral law (the inexorable fact of duty) requires us to assume the being of God as what he calls a practical postulate necessitated by moral reason. But of course the facts of morality have also been used to argue against theism, especially in the form of the problem of evil, a point Hume pushed vociferously. How could reflection on good and evil lead Kant and Hume in such opposite directions? Sorley realized they were approaching the question from different points of view. Hume directed his attention to the struggle of mankind, what men suffered, the cruelty of the world, and the havoc of life. Kant, though, wasn't looking at outward performance but at the inward law of goodness and the power it reveals in the mind that is conscious of it.

Might nature after all be regarded as a fitting field for the realization of goodness? The question Sorley was considering is not what a perfect world

looks like but what a world might need to look like in order to make growth in goodness possible and likely. Real agents, rather than marionettes and automatons, require the possibility of missing the mark; only by this means might they come to have goodness and consciousness of the good—not to mention communion with God himself.

On the evidential role of evil and the difference between Kant and Hume, Sorley agreed with Kant and used the very fact of evil as the foundation for a theistic argument. He argued that both the moral order and the order of nature belong to the essence of reality, and if it's synthesis and rapprochement we seek, they can be harmoniously united in one universe only when nature is understood not merely in its present appearance but as working out the purpose of making moral beings. The problem of evil, Sorley thought, is often cast in a way that overlooks the creation of beings who will achieve goodness only freely, requiring experience of all sorts of circumstances that it may develop into secure harmony with the moral order.

Sorley's argument wasn't a straightforward inference from morality to God but instead a bit more circuitous, with a wider range. It is little surprising that Sorley's moral argument, forged in the crucible of unspeakable personal loss, insisted on neither trivializing this world's travails nor allowing them the final word.

An Integrative Mind

Charles Taylor writes that the secular age into which we've entered features *exclusive humanism*, a vision of life in which the immanent takes primacy, a humanism accepting "no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true."[14] In contrast with this remarkable trend, Sorley gave extended arguments that morality functions semiotically—as a sign—by pointing beyond itself to eternal goods that, rather than trivializing or devaluing earthly or temporal goods, imbue them with sacramental significance.

A close look reveals that Sorley's approach, rather than being dated, remains a lively, instructive, and relevant model to follow. He demonstrated what long and intimate acquaintance with the world of ideas can produce,

and his enduring paradigm can serve as an inspiration and corrective to much of what passes for apologetics today.

Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison

Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison (1856–1931) struck a number of the same chords as did other notable moral apologists, while distinguishing himself in a few salient respects. He lauded Kant on the issue of value, tracing that line of argument to focus on the principled reason to side with Kant over Hume on the problem of evil. Still, he was critical of Kant in other respects, thinking Kant paid God's immanence inadequate attention. Pringle-Pattison saw clearly various implications of the moral argument for the character of God, not just the matter of God's existence, and he intentionally launched criticisms at Hume's narrow empiricism.

Rebelling against the absolutism of Hegel and of such Hegelians as F. H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet, for whom the individual is merged with the universal, he insisted on the uniqueness of the individual person. He thus assigned primacy to personality—an influence that would later affect William James, George Santayana, Bertrand Russell, and George Herbert Mead. He thought that both British empiricism and Anglo-Hegelianism degraded the independence of the individual, and he described his philosophy as a "larger idealism" that reconciles the dictates of morality and religion with the findings of science, *purpose* being the supreme category.

His book most relevant to moral apologetics was *The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy*, comprising his Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen in 1912 and 1913.[15] His principal purpose in this work was to engage with the long-standing debate about the significance of Enlightenment philosophy and nineteenth-century scientific developments for the coherence and plausibility of Christian theism by setting these debates within the context of the idealist philosophy to which he himself was a major contributor.

As a native of Edinburgh, he must have grown up accustomed to hearing quite a bit about his town's most famous philosophical son, the towering eighteenth-century philosopher, economist, essayist, and historian David Hume, whose *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* dealt primarily with

who God is rather than *whether God exists*. Whereas Hume argued we could have at most a vague sense of who God is based on the available evidence, Pringle-Pattison demurred, arguing that Hume's conclusions were determined by the restricted nature of his premises. Hume looked to nature, not to the incessant hopes and fears that actuate the human mind. We should instead direct our gaze at the sentient creation and the facts of human history, the center and foreground of the whole picture, a broader array of evidence than Hume considered.

The right analysis of the world's evils can be rightly judged only in the light of what we take to be the end in view. Pringle-Pattison was drawn more to Kant's fixation on the idea of an ultimate end through the idea of value or worth than to Hume's focus on the less-than-optimal conditions of the world. If there is reason to think that the world is, as John Keats put it, a "value of soul-making," or, as Gotthold Lessing put it, a "divine education," rather than a context aimed at maximizing hedonistic delights, there is no particular reason to think the world shouldn't feature a measure of evils.

Steeped in the tradition of idealism, Pringle-Pattison suggested that the entirety of the latter half of the nineteenth century was dominated, among philosophers, by a battle between naturalists and idealists. The crux of their debate was this: Is the universe the expression of a transcendent Greatness and Goodness, or is it, in the ultimate analysis, a collection of unknowing material facts? Is the essence and cause of all things "only dust that rises up and is lightly laid again, or is it the Eternal Love with which Dante closes his vision, the Love that moves the sun and the other Stars"?[16] He was convinced that "beauty and goodness are not born of the clash of atoms; they are effluences of something more perfect and more divine."[17]

He wrote that "reverence for the moral law, the self-humiliation caused by failure to fulfill its demands, the sense of sin, the attitude of worship and utter self-surrender, are possible only if the subject feels himself in presence of a Reality beside which all else pales into insignificance. And it is to the moral and religious man himself that we must go, not to the philosopher weaving theories about him, if we are to understand his experience aright."[18] He thought the conception of intrinsic values is the clue to the ultimate nature of reality, and that divine omnipotence consists in the all-compelling power of goodness and love to enlighten the grossest darkness and to melt the hardest heart. "We needs must love the highest when we see

it."[19] Contra Hume, the God to which the truths of morality point is not an amoral deity indifferent to us but rather a God whose very nature is self-giving love more powerful than death.

Hastings Rashdall

Anthony Thiselton writes that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the most convincing advocate of the moral argument was perhaps Hastings Rashdall (1858–1924). Rashdall was critical of Sidgwick's inability to see that rational benevolence has primacy over rational self-love, so while recognizing the dualism of practical reason, Rashdall underscored the strength of at least certain versions of theism to account for the priority of benevolence and altruism. We will return to this discussion in part 3.

As both a moral apologist and a kind of utilitarian, Rashdall also demonstrated that agreement on normative ethical theory is not a prerequisite for proponents of the moral argument. What is needed more centrally is recognition of an essential dependence relation of morality on God, not agreement on the peripheral matter of fine-grained normative analysis. Rashdall argued that a generous empiricism will not domesticate morality, watering down its authority, but instead insist on allowing the deliverances of morality, the binding nature of the moral law, and the transcendent implications and aspirations of the moral good to inform metaphysics. Like many others, he thought the moral argument works best when combined with other pieces of natural theology.[20]

What seemed obvious to Rashdall is that the moral law or ideal cannot be found wholly in individual human consciousness:

> Only if we believe in the existence of a Mind for which the true moral ideal is already in some sense real, a Mind which is the source of whatever is true in our own moral judgments, can we rationally think of the moral idea as no less real than the world itself. Only so can we believe in an absolute standard of right and wrong, which is as independent of this or that man's actual ideas and actual desires as the facts of material nature. The belief in God, though not (like the belief in a real and an active self) a postulate of there being any such things as Morality at all, is the logical presupposition of an "objective" or absolute Morality. A moral ideal can exist nowhere and nohow but in a mind; an absolute moral ideal can exist only in a Mind from which

> all Reality is derived. Our moral ideal can only claim objective validity in so far as it can rationally be regarded as the revelation of a moral ideal eternally existing in the mind of God.[21]

If we refuse to deflate morality and its demands, "the belief in God, if not so obviously and primarily a postulate of Morality as the belief in a permanent spiritual and active self, is still a postulate of a Morality which shall be able fully to satisfy the demands of the moral consciousness. It may conveniently be called the secondary postulate of Morality." The very idea of morality implies action directed toward an end that has value. If the value of "good" has its counterpart in the divine mind, the course of events is itself governed by that same mind that is the source of our moral ideas and must be ultimately directed toward the true moral idea, disclosed however imperfectly in the moral consciousness of man. What valid human judgments deem good must be part of the divine end.[22]

Clement Webb

In 1922, John Baillie wrote the following:

> The last decade has witnessed several notable additions to the literature of that peculiarly English philosophical movement which seems to have appropriated for itself the name of Ethical Theism and which goes back very largely to the writing of Campbell Fraser and Martineau. We have had especially Mr. Balfour's *Theism and Humanism*, Professor Pringle-Pattison's *Idea of God*, Professor Sorley's *Moral Values*, and Professor Clement Webb's *God and Personality*—all of them Gifford Lectures delivered in the Scottish universities and representing, on a broad view, the same general tendency of thought. There seems no doubt that these volumes, and the very considerable literature of which they are but the most important examples, are indicative of a reaction against the very confident English Hegelianism so widely sponsored in the previous generation.[23]

Clement Webb (1865–1954) usually did work on the moral argument in the context of his wider theological interests. He primarily looked to Plato for inspiration on the nature of moral goodness and to Kant on the nature of moral duties. Although he initially thought Kant had reduced religion to morality, he eventually softened on that conviction.[24] As empirical experience justifies belief in an external world, he took our moral experience as solid justification for belief in moral duties. Inspired by Martineau,[25] Webb argued that the phenomenology of moral duties (that

Kant explained so well) warranted belief in departing from an overly ambitious kind of Kantian autonomy that precludes belief in a “Higher than ourselves” that gives us the moral law. For Webb, sanction for belief in such an ultimate source is found in morality, a source both immanent and transcendent.[26]

W. G. de Burgh

Born in 1866, W. G. de Burgh did not think moral evidence entailed theism but that it did incline toward it. Such evidence includes both goodness and rightness, and he endorsed a cumulative case for God’s existence. He thought it took Kant’s work on obligations to give the moral argument its teeth and momentum. Consciousness of moral obligations implies the reality of a moral order, which then implies God as its author and sustainer. Likewise with moral values, which are better explained by a personal God than by an impersonal Platonic realm. When it came to God’s love, he departed from the tradition of analogical predication at points, thinking it inadequate for a full appreciation of the incarnation.[27] He also argued that divine holiness without divine love would call into question God’s goodness.[28]

A. E. Taylor

A. E. Taylor (1869–1945), in an effort to carve out evidential space for morality, argued at length against an artificial dichotomy between fact and value. Divorcing facts and values is like trying to separate the sounds of a great symphony from its musical quality. More important than what we do is who we are, he thought, and what is needed is an adequate account for the sort of external assistance we desperately require to be radically transformed—after all, we can’t pull ourselves up by our own hair. Echoing Newman, he argued that the inherent features of moral guilt point in the direction of a personal and perfectly loving God as our First and Final Cause. He counseled close and sustained attentiveness to moral evidence and modeled a laudably expansive epistemology.[29]

What were the telling features of moral guilt that Taylor identified? First, it is characteristic of the human sense of guilt that it always involves condemnation of our own selves and our own doings and is thus radically different from any disconnect with our surroundings.

Second, nothing is more characteristic of the human sense of guilt than its indelibility, its power of asserting itself with unabated poignancy in spite of all lapse of time and all changes in the self and its environment. Old misdoings can haunt and torment us all through life. And this is no recent phenomenon; even the poetry of Homer reveals there are some kinds of conduct regarded as especially abysmal and atrocious and sure to provoke the anger of the unseen guardians of the moral law.

Third, recognition of our guilt is regularly attended by a demand for punishment. We recognize the justice of a social penalty decreed on us only when and if we have already sat in judgment on ourselves. The gravity of forgiveness attests to this demand for judgment.

Fourth, there is a recognition of the peculiarly polluting quality of moral guilt. All languages use the same words for what offends the conscience as bespeaking that which is defiling and loathsome to sight, touch, or smell. Wrongdoing is intuitively cast as filthy, dirty, stinking; it is the same specific emotional reaction characteristic of humanity in all ages and all levels of civilization. An occupational hazard of contemporary ethicists is thinking of morality only as obligations and thinking too little about the association between sin and uncleanness. In the realm of sense, dirt is a vehicle for infection and danger.

Fifth, what do we feel to be defiled and polluted by contact with what awakens our sense of guilt or wounds our sense of honor? The sense of both is itself a product of the moralizing process. Truly returning to nature would require giving up shame, honor, and chivalry. What is amiss in all of us is not just what we have done but also that the fountain of our moral personality is poisoned. We are fallen creatures, and we know it. Our moral task is no mere business of canalizing or embanking the course of a stream; it has to begin higher up with the purification of the bitter waters at their source. We have not just broken moral rules; we have insulted or proved false to a person of supreme excellence, entitled to wholehearted devotion.

Taylor was convinced that, in the light of such a dire prognosis, only God’s love and grace are enough to provide the cure. He argued that it’s

because so many modern moralists are afraid to make the idea of God central in their theories of conduct that their treatment of guilt is inadequate to the actual moral experiences of men with any depth of character. There is no replacement for close, careful attentiveness to the moral evidence in need of explanation, of which objective moral guilt is a central example. "Thus once more I find myself forced back on the conclusion that, to be truly itself, the moral life must have as its last motive love to God, and so become transfigured into the life of religious faith and devotion."[30]

Language of transfiguration was intentional; we need more than a tweaking of our moral character. We need to be made new, to be radically transformed into something of which we have an inkling, an inkling of the most valuable good there is. Or to alter the analogy, we need to be transported into a whole new country—though no strange land, but rather *home*. Although the world is not enough, God is.

Of course, yet again, all of this is all too brief, but perhaps it will whet your appetite to read Taylor's *Faith of a Moralist* for yourself. It's a beautifully labyrinthine work featuring a plethora of moving parts in Taylor's architectonic system. It's virtually impossible to reduce it to a few pithy ideas, and the demand for such a reduction is impracticable, unfair to the breadth and texture of Taylor's expansive work. As readers we shouldn't insist that an author always answer our questions on our terms; instead, we need to be willing to be patient and learn the artistic rhythms, systematic approach, and skillful dance steps of the author. Consider this introduction to Taylor your invitation to do so.

W. R. Matthews

Walter Robert Matthews (1881–1973) found the moral argument (along with the teleological argument) the most persuasive of all the theistic arguments. When reflecting on the moral evolution of mankind, he asked what it implies concerning the nature of the universe. When discussing the conscience, he inquired into the grounds of its characteristic property, and when pondering the nature of the good, he asked, "What is the place of the Good in the general structure of the universe?"[31] In each case he was led to the theistic hypothesis.

C. S. Lewis

Probably the most famous moral argument of all is the popular version that C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) developed at the beginning of his enormously influential book *Mere Christianity*. Lewis started with the commonsense observation that we make moral judgments about right and wrong that we take to be objectively true. This suggests a reality beyond and behind the moral law that Lewis went on to argue is like a mind, which points ultimately to a theistic explanation. That there is such a law is one of two basic realities that Lewis thought gave us an important clue about reality. The other clue is that we invariably fall short of such a standard, which points the way to the sort of performative moral argument we have already briefly considered and will consider again later on.

Around the same time that Lewis articulated this argument, he spelled out an elaborate argument for a more academic audience that we must take our basic moral judgments as self-evidently true. This is, properly understood, an argument for objective moral truth, the topic of the second major part of this book, so we will defer further discussion of it until then. Lewis also developed other variations of the moral argument in his essays “The Poison of Subjectivism” and “De Futilitate,” the latter of which argued that our condemnation of cruelty and indifference gives us the substance of a moral argument.[32]

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTER 4

This chapter canvassed a range of late modern thinkers—Newman, Sidgwick, James, Balfour, Sorley, Pringle-Pattison, Rashdall, Webb, de Burgh, Taylor, and Matthews—and culminated with C. S. Lewis, as much a contemporary as a late modern. Newman’s expansive epistemology directed attention especially to the phenomenology of conscience, giving us direct experience of One to whom we’re responsible, before whom we’re ashamed, whose claims on us we fear, making possible what he called a “real assent” and a sense of deep assurance.

Sidgwick provided the ingredients for a theistic argument based on the dualism of practical reason. As a radical empiricist, James took moral and religious experiences seriously as potentially veridical, insisting that a rule of reason that doesn't allow us to find truth that is there is irrational. Balfour explored the deficiencies of naturalistic accounts of morality. Whether Sorley was integrating or reconciling life and work, finite and infinite goods, the temporal and transcendent, the moral law and evil, philosophy and poetry, or morality and metaphysics, his was an expansive and integrative mind and an open and capacious heart whose prescient insights have endured the test of time.

Pringle-Pattison saw clearly various implications of the moral argument for the character of God, not just the matter of God's existence, and he intentionally launched criticisms at Hume's narrow empiricism. Rashdall argued for an essential dependence relation of morality on God, and he thought the moral argument works best when combined with other pieces of natural theology. Webb asserted that the phenomenology of moral duties (that Kant explained so well) warranted belief in departing from an overly ambitious kind of Kantian autonomy that precludes belief in a "Higher than ourselves" that gives us the moral law. De Burgh maintained that moral values are better explained by a personal God than by an impersonal Platonic realm. Taylor argued that what is needed is an adequate account for the sort of external assistance we desperately require to be radically transformed and that the inherent features of moral guilt point in the direction of a personal and perfectly loving God as our First and Final Cause. Matthews found the moral argument (along with the teleological argument) the most persuasive of all the theistic arguments, and Lewis popularized the moral argument in his BBC talks during World War II and in book 1 of *Mere Christianity*.

[1] See John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870; repr., University of Notre Dame Press, 1979). For an excellent contemporary application of a Newmanesque explication of moral phenomenology, especially in conversation with William May, Germain

Grisez, and John Finnish, see John F. Crosby, “The Personal Encounter with God in Moral Obligation,” in *Personalist Papers* (Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 64–92. It is an application that insists on closely attending to the datum of moral obligation and, in the process, defending a central thesis of Spanish philosopher Francisco Suárez (1548–1617).

2 Newman, *Grammar of Assent,* 100.

3 Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 101.

4 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford University Press, 1958), esp. chap. 4.

5 Readers can probably detect that this is part of the ongoing discussion of the coincidence thesis. See Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Hackett, 1981).

6 William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *Essays in Pragmatism* (Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1948), 103–4.

7 Arthur James Balfour, *Theism and Humanism* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1915). See C. S. Lewis, “Ex Libris,” *Christian Century* 79 (June 6, 1962): 719.

8 J. H. Muirhead, “In Memoriam: William Ritchie Sorley,” *Philosophy* 11, no. 41 (1936): 120.

9 G. F. Stout, “W. R. Sorley (1855–1935),” *Mind* 45, no. 177 (1936): 124.

10 Thanks to Nick Hadsell for pointing out this article: Michele Odisseas Impagnatiello, “Ethics vs. Metaphysics,” accessed July 12, 2025, https://philpapers.org/archive/IMPEVM.pdf. It encapsulates a conviction at odds with Lotze’s dictum, suggesting that it’s generally irrational to infer metaphysical theories from what we think we know about ethics. Obviously, this is a view at great variance with Sorley’s (and our) understanding of these matters, although we cannot discuss it further here.

11 Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (Longmans, Green, 1919), 30–31.

12 Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Charles Hamilton Sorley: A Biography* (Cecil Woolf, 1985), 12.

13 A. E. Taylor, *Faith of a Moralist* (Macmillan, 1930), 16.

14 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 18.

15 Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy: The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Aberdeen*

in the Years 1912 and 1913, 2nd ed. (1917; repr., Oxford University Press, 1920).

16 Pringle-Pattison, *Idea of God*, 40.

17 Pringle-Pattison, *Idea of God*, 42.

18 Pringle-Pattison, *Idea of God*, 252.

19 Pringle-Pattison, *Idea of God*, 411.

20 Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil: A Treatise on Moral Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Clarendon, 1907).

21 Rashdall, *Theory of Good and Evil*, 212.

22 Rashdall, *Theory of Good and Evil*, 213.

23 John Baillie, review of *Studies in Christian Philosophy*, by W. R. Matthews, *Philosophical Review* 31, no. 181 (January 1922): 191. See Alexander Campbell Fraser, *Philosophy of Theism* (London and Edinburgh, 1895).

24 A vindication of Kant on this score can be found in Stephen Palmquist, "Does Kant Reduce Religion to Morality?," *Kant-Studien* 83, no. 2 (January 1992): 129–48.

25 James Martineau, *A Study of Religion: Its Sources and Content*, vols. 1–2 (Oxford, 1888); *Types of Ethical Theory*, vols. 1–2 (Cosimo, 2006).

26 See Clement Chares Julian Webb, *Studies in the History of Natural Theology* (1915; repr., Clarendon, 2012); *Divine Personality and Human Life* (University of Aberdeen, 1920); and *Kant's Philosophy of Religion* (Clarendon, 1926).

27 This issue is at the heart of one of the debates between classical theists and theistic personalists.

28 W. G. de Burgh, *From Morality to Religion: Being the Gifford Lectures, Delivered at the University of St. Andrews, 1938* (Kennikat, 1938); *The Legacy of the Ancient World*, 2 vols. (Penguin Books, 1955).

29 A. E. Taylor, *Socrates* (Beacon, 1951); *Faith of a Moralist* (Macmillan, 1930); and *Does God Exist?* (Macmillan, 1947). In *Does God Exist?*, Taylor ends with an argument for the resurrection of Jesus to augment his earlier popular version of the moral argument, their conjunction facilitated without the constraints and confining strictures of the Gifford Lectures.

30 Taylor, *Faith of a Moralist*, 209.

31 Alan P. F. Sell, *Four Philosophical Anglicans* (Ashgate, 2010), 102–3. See W. R. Matthews, *Studies in Christian Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1921).

32 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001); “De Futilitate” and “The Poison of Subjectivism,” in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Eerdmans, 1995). Lewis was also strongly influenced by G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936). T. J. Gentry, in personal correspondence on January 1, 2019, wrote this about Chesterton:

> There is a nexus of the rational, affective, and imaginative in Chesterton’s apologetic writings, cultural critiques, and fiction by which he presses readers with the sense of both the intuitiveness and logic of belief in God based on morality and other considerations. Chesterton’s use of imaginatively fired passional reason helps build a bridge between the good God and human perceptions of goodness, joy, and so on. While he does not offer a moral apologetic argument for God’s existence, per se, Chesterton provides breadcrumbs—moral clues and segues—along the path. His is a rational-affective-imaginative triad of apologetic method that is at once cumulative and teleological, while at the same time rooted in common sense and human experience. What may be true of Chesterton is that his moral apologetic intent is a culmination of his other implicit arguments for God’s existence. All of these means, and possibly others found in Chesterton’s works, reveal an undercurrent of morality and goodness that make Chesterton at least a support and cohort in moral apologetics, even if he is not a moral apologist particularly.

5

Contemporaries

As contemporary figures in moral apologetics proliferate, constraints of space severely limit our sketches of them. There are about twenty to discuss, so we will say proportionately less about each. Their proliferation testifies to the resurgence of interest in moral arguments in recent years. Each one is worth looking into in more detail than we are able to do here. Bibliographical information is provided for further investigation. The point here is to underscore some of the fertility, ingenuity, and richness of the contemporary discussion of moral apologetics, and several of these figures will be discussed at greater length later in the book.

A. C. Ewing

Born just a year after C. S. Lewis, A. C. Ewing (1899–1973) was a Cambridge philosopher who worked extensively on the topics of moral goodness, idealism, and various issues in metaphysics and epistemology. In his chapter called “Moral Arguments for God” in his *Value and Reality*, he discussed several versions of the moral argument for God while expressing some surprise that there were not more of them. He offered a variant of his own that he thought could avoid some pitfalls others fell prey to, writing that “the unconditionally compelling character of the moral law as it presents itself to us insofar as we are good men suggests as an explanatory hypothesis the view that the law is in some way bound up with the fundamental nature of reality, and that the easiest way of conceiving the objectivity of the moral law is to think of it as realized in the mind of a

deity."[1] He was also to note that the character of such a deity would have to be nontrivially good, precluding such notions as, say, mere pantheism.

David Elton Trueblood

David Elton Trueblood (1900–1994) was born a year after Ewing and was a noted twentieth-century American Quaker, prolific author, and well-known theologian. In his favored account of the moral argument, he distinguished between theistic *sanction* of the moral law and a theistic *explanation* of the moral law. "The problem is not that of what will the moral law power in men's lives, but that of a conception of the universe which will make the very existence of a moral law understandable. It is often supposed that the theistic emphasis on objectivity refers to sanction when, in fact, it refers to understanding." He also emphasized that the moral argument is most effective when it's part of a larger cumulative case, and he noted the distinctive power of the moral argument to reveal more of God's character than does, say, an argument from nature. Like Taylor, he thought that within our own moral life we see God with "the mask half fallen off."[2]

Austin Farrer

Austin Farrer (1904–1968), a friend and colleague of Lewis's, focused on the intrinsic, intuitively accessible value and dignity of persons in his variant of the moral argument. Consider the way we normatively ought to think about other people. It is of great importance, Farrer argued, that we think about others in such a way that we value them properly. The only limitations that such regard for others should encounter are those that cannot be avoided: those set by the conditions of our life, as he put it. Such regard should be at once so pure and so entire that it leads to a sort of frustration coming from incompleteness of our definition of those we so regard. Thinking of our neighbors in too garden-variety a way cannot sustain the esteem we intuitively think they deserve. The conclusion to which Farrer felt compelled is that what deserves our regard is not simply our neighbor but God in our neighbor and our neighbor in God.[3]

Basil Mitchell

Basil Mitchell (1917–2011) was an English professor and onetime Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oxford. He delivered the 1974–1976 Gifford Lectures at Glasgow, which culminated in his 1980 book *Morality, Religious and Secular*, one among many significant publications. The lectures analyzed the moral confusion of contemporary society, relating rival conceptions of morality with a wide variety of views about the nature and predicament of man. Mitchell argued that many secular thinkers possess a traditional "Christian" conscience that they find hard to defend in terms of an entirely secular worldview.[4]

George Mavrodes

George Mavrodes (1926–2019) was an American philosopher who underscored the ontologically odd nature of binding moral obligations in a naturalistic world. His point about the metaphysical oddness (or "queerness," as it used to be called) of moral facts, traditionally construed, echoed an earlier point made by J. L. Mackie. In Mackie's case, he used such oddness as an argument against moral realism, but Mavrodes turned the tables, emphasizing that if such facts don't fit well into a naturalistic world, so much the worse for naturalism. A theistic world, in contrast, provides them a congenial environment.[5]

At this juncture we should also mention Stuart C. Hackett (1925–2012), who defended the moral argument not only in his *The Resurrection of Theism* but also in his *The Rediscovery of the Highest Good* and *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim*.[6] His influence is hard to overestimate. Several of the featured thinkers in this volume, like Steve Evans, Paul Copan, and Mark Linville, were among his pupils.

H. P. Owen

H. P. Owen (1926–1996) was a wonderfully systematic thinker, and his work is a joy to read. He was a student of history. As such, his moral

argument is couched in what was one of the better cursory sketches of the history of the moral argument. On the shoulders of Newman, Sorley, Taylor, and others, he constructed an intelligent moral argument. Distinguishing between self-evidence and self-explanation, he argued that various moral phenomena, though they fall into the former category, don't fall into the latter, so they cry out for an adequate account. In discussing the deliverances of morality and delineating their salient features, he patiently demonstrated their theistic implications without pretending to have offered anything in the vicinity of a logical proof or demonstration. Significantly, he extended his case not just to theism generally but to Christianity particularly.[7]

Clement Dore

Clement Dore (1930–2016) argued, in the fourth chapter of his book *Theism*, that morality gives us reasons to believe in a being with God-like power and knowledge.[8] He started with the Platonic insight that a person's wrongdoing inexorably harms himself. This is an aspect of morality that no Hobbesian view of ethics can adequately explain. According to Hobbes, ethics serves to adjudicate conflicts that arise from self-interest. What kind of harm does wrongdoing entail? Dore argued that this harm must involve more than merely being a bad person, because some people are perfectly content to be bad people. In fact, some hedonists relish the prospect while still seeming to avoid great harm in this life as a result. But if morality is overriding, such people will be harmed by their significant wrongdoing. Dore contended that a being with "God-like power" and "God-like knowledge" and who is thus a *person* provides the best explanation of this. Although Dore's argument hardly proved the existence of the full-fledged God of orthodox theism, he asserted that it did imply that another doctrine, which is normally associated with theism, is true—namely, that human beings survive earthly death.[9]

Robert Adams

Robert Adams (1937–2024) did groundbreaking work on Leibniz, virtue, and theistic ethics, and he offered innovative variants of the moral argument on that foundation. His landmark work *Finite and Infinite Goods* breathed new life into both a Platonic theistic account of the good and a divine command theory of the right (moral obligation).[10] In addition to explicating versions of Kant's moral argument, he offered one of his own on the basis of his divine command account. Adams thought it entirely appropriate to deploy strong moral convictions about right and wrong as premises in a reasoned argument. After defending at length divine command theory as the best account of the nature of right and wrong, he observed that since such a theory entails God's existence, this provides a measure of evidence for God's reality. We will have occasion to discuss him at greater length in a later chapter.

Marilyn McCord Adams

Robert's wife, Marilyn (1943–2017), was a powerful philosopher and theologian in her own right who, as mentioned before, wrote a magisterial two-volume work on William of Ockham. Among her accomplishments was a demonstration of how God's incommensurable goodness can help defuse the most otherwise intractable versions of the problem of evil. Writing about the problem of evil, the diametric opposite of the moral argument, she emphasized the need to address "horrendous evils," the most difficult cases to deal with, requiring nothing less than *defeat* by the goodness of God. In her words, "My strategy for showing how this can be done is to identify ways that created participation in horrors can be integrated into the participants' relation to God, where God is understood to be the incommensurate Good, and the relation to God is one that is overall incommensurably good *for the participant*."[11]

Linda Zagzebski

Linda Zagzebski (b. 1946) did important work in theistic ethics in her book *Divine Motivation Theory*.[12] Also, rather than asking "Why be moral?" she

asks another question in its vicinity not so easily answered: “Should I try to be moral?” In short, it doesn’t make sense to attempt something one can’t do. If we are relegated to depend on our own moral powers and capacities alone, our moral effectiveness seems to be in serious jeopardy, rendering the enterprise of morality futile. Since morality presumably isn’t futile, we have reason to think that we are not relegated to depend just on our own moral powers and capacities. More recently her work on moral exemplarism contains rich implications for theistic ethics as well.[13]

C. Stephen Evans

C. Stephen Evans (b. 1948), a retired Baylor University Kierkegaard expert, has defended a divine command theory of moral obligations and a natural signs approach to apologetics.[14] Natural signs, on Evans’s account, satisfy the Pascalian constraints of being both widely accessible and easily resistible—consonant with a measure of divine hiddenness. His use of natural signs is another way in which to couch the moral argument—something more experiential than most inductive, abductive, or deductive formulations. The two moral natural signs he adduced are human dignity/worth and moral duties. He has also written the online Stanford encyclopedia article on moral arguments.[15]

J. P. Moreland

J. P. Moreland (b. 1948) constructed an argument on the basis of stubborn moral facts in *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei*.[16] Moreland’s evidential considerations for God’s existence from the arena of morality focus on central philosophical insights and the strictures imposed by what constitutes a workable worldview. A worldview is to explain reality as it is in ways that follow naturally from its central explanatory commitments. A “recalcitrant fact” is one that is obstinately uncooperative in light of attempts to handle it by some theory. Particular recalcitrant moral facts on naturalism are threefold: (1) objective, intrinsic value and an objective moral law; (2) the reality of human moral action; and (3) intrinsic human value and rights.

More recently, Moreland teamed up with David Horner to write the excellent primer *Metaethics*, helpful in defending the sort of moral realism on which the moral argument is usually predicated.[17]

John E. Hare

Yale's John E. Hare (b. 1949), son of philosopher R. M. Hare, did landmark work on Kantian moral arguments, both (in his terms) the "argument from grace" and the "argument from providence." He was a bona fide expert on the ethics of Aristotle, Kant, Scotus, and R. M. Hare, and his primary contribution to theistic ethics and the moral argument was his trilogy on God and ethics, loosely patterned after the model of the Trinity. The book corresponding to the Son was *The Moral Gap*.[18] The book corresponding to the Father was *God's Command*, and the book focusing on the Spirit was *Unity and the Holy Spirit*.[19] Hare and Baggett are currently editing an Oxford University Press collection on the moral argument. Later chapters will elaborate on Hare's analysis of the two aspects of moral faith, corresponding to the fourth and fifth prongs of our own moral argument provided in part 3. Hare also effected a rapprochement of sorts between aspects of realism and prescriptivism in his "prescriptive realism" approach.[20]

C. Stephen Layman

C. Stephen Layman (b. 1955) began his moral argument with what he calls the overriding reason thesis (ORT), which says "the overriding (or strongest) reasons always favor doing what is morally required," and the conditional thesis (CT), which says that "if there is no God and no life after death, then the ORT is not true." Since there are compelling reasons to reject neither, what follows is either God's existence or the existence of an afterlife in which virtue is rewarded. But in light of the incalculable complexity of a system like karma and the transmigration of souls, the moral order postulated by nontheistic reincarnation paradoxically provides evidence for the existence of a personal God after all.[21]

Jerry L. Walls

The inimitable Jerry L. Walls (b. 1955) has written a trilogy on eschatology, the third volume of which is on the topic of heaven. In that book, and elsewhere, he argued that not just theism per se but Christian theology in particular accounts for morality better and more fully than does naturalistic evolutionary theory. He advanced three arguments for this claim in *Heaven*.[22] Christian theology not only accounts for altruism in a way that reinforces our instinctive admiration of it but it also has a ready explanation for why moral obligation has an objective ground. He added that, in a Christian account, morality is not tarnished with the sort of deception and illusion that various naturalistic accounts rely on at certain points. Walls and Baggett have also written a tetralogy on the moral argument: *Good God*; *God and Cosmos*; *The Moral Argument*; and *The Good, the Right, and the Real*.[23]

R. Scott Smith

R. Scott Smith (b. 1957), in his *In Search of Moral Knowledge*, offered an epistemic version of the moral argument against naturalism and in favor of theism.[24] There he articulated several specific ethical theories, while endeavoring to construct a master argument to critique all naturalistic ethical theories in one fell swoop. He took Daniel Dennett as a paradigmatic naturalist, one who takes both cognitive science and the implications of naturalism seriously. Although Dennett is not entirely consistent, he's hoisted by his own proverbial petard. Dennett encounters deep difficulties that undermine many of his claims, Smith argued, including any principled reason to be committed to naturalism itself. More recently, Smith has written a book-length critique of constructivism, a rival to moral realism in metaethics that we will discuss in part 2.[25]

Mark Linville

In Mark Linville's (b. 1957) entry in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, he offered two independent moral arguments for God's existence.[26] The first is an argument from evolutionary naturalism, which itself has two parts. First, on evolutionary naturalism our moral beliefs lack warrant. Ethical theories predicated on naturalism are found wanting on the grounds of evolutionary moral psychology. The second part of that first argument is that theism is able to avoid such moral skepticism. The second argument is an argument from personal dignity. He tests an array of normative ethical theories for their ability to account for the essential moral standing of human persons. Egoism, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics are all found wanting in their explanatory adequacy in accounting for the Kantian principle to treat people as ends in themselves. Naturalism per se is further implicated in its failure to account for the existence of persons themselves. Theism, in contrast, is well situated and equipped to explain human persons, moral agency, and personal dignity.

Paul Copan

Paul Copan (b. 1962) has done stellar work on the moral argument, including penning one of the most anthologized versions of it and reflecting deeply on connections between the moral argument and the problem of evil. Of his numerous contributions we will mention just two, both of which involve extending the argument beyond theism to Christianity in particular. First, he has done groundbreaking work on reconciling challenging Old Testament passages with nonnegotiable moral intuitions. In that connection, he's written no fewer than three important books.[27]

Second, he has also added texture and an important twist to the moral argument by adducing such historical roles played by Christ and his followers in leading to societies that are "progress-prone rather than progress-resistant," including such signs of progress as the founding of modern science, poverty-diminishing free markets, equal rights for all before the law, religious liberty, women's suffrage, human rights initiatives, and the abolition of practices such as slavery, foot binding, and widow burning.[28]

Angus Menuge

Angus Menuge (b. 1963) has done important work on human dignity and value, debunking objections to moral knowledge, critiquing naturalistic ethics, and underscoring challenges associated with the effort to derive ethics from an unguided evolutionary process alone. For example, he distinguished between strong and weak evolutionary ethics (EE). The latter assumes moral psychology would have been different had evolution played out differently, the former that moral facts themselves would be different. Whereas strong EE holds little realistic hope of sustaining objective moral facts, weak EE precludes objective moral knowledge.[29] More recently he has addressed debunking objections to moral knowledge.

Angus Ritchie

Angus Ritchie (b. 1974) has offered an epistemic variant of the moral argument. Whereas Menuge focused on the way naturalism functions to preclude moral knowledge, Ritchie, in *From Morality to Metaphysics*, focused more on the way naturalism has a difficult time *explaining* moral knowledge. After identifying weaknesses in a broad range of secular metaethical theories, Ritchie advanced the claim that the teleological nature of theistic ethics is needed to overcome the central epistemic problem he identified. Ritchie doesn't deny that secular ethics can justify moral beliefs; rather, its weakness, unlike theistic ethics, is in explaining or accounting for how our epistemic cognitive faculties can be reliable. He presses a kind of dilemma on nontheistic accounts of morality. Subjectivist theories such as expressivism can certainly make sense of the fact that we make the ethical judgments we do, but they empty morality of its objective authority. Objectivist theories that take morality seriously, however, have difficulty explaining our capacity to make true moral judgments unless the process by which humans came to hold these capacities is one that is controlled by a being such as God.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTER 5

With this chapter, part 1 of the book draws to a close. Previous chapters have pointed to the long history of relevant philosophical reflections about ethical truth that proponents of the moral argument can use to make their case. The couple dozen or so contemporary figures that this last chapter considered offer a range of variants of and contributions to moral arguments for God's existence. Some direct their gaze at issues of human value and dignity, axiological matters in need of robust explanation. Others fix their focus on the qualities of various moral facts that, while a bad fit in a secular or naturalistic world, find a congenial environment in a theistic world. Some stand on the shoulders of Immanuel Kant and either talk about the need for divine grace to be forgiven or morally transformed, or point to the need for virtue and ultimate happiness to fit together in order for morality to make full rational sense. Some highlight the intrinsic limitations of a naturalistic evolutionary story to make good enough sense of moral facts, others point to the distinctive features of authoritative moral duties to accentuate their evidential significance, while yet others point to the power of theism generally or Christianity particularly to offer a good enough response to the problem of evil. Some talk about how theism can imbue us with the requisite principled moral faith, others speak of the historical dimensions of Christianity, and others point to the power of the teleological nature of theistic ethics.

The overall impression from reviewing such a wide range of evidential considerations is that the prospects are good for a powerful cumulative moral case for theism and against ethics predicated on a secular or naturalistic paradigm. We shall attempt to gesture toward such a case in this book, drawing from and expanding on the resources of fellow moral apologists, both contemporary and historical. First, though, in part 2, we need to offer a case for the sort of moral realism on which such an argument is based.

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That concludes our whirlwind tour of the history of the moral argument. Obviously, it remains but cursory.[30] Rather than a book-length history, we thought it worthwhile to put a more succinct version here in a primer of this nature. We could have discussed several more of the contemporary figures who have added to the discussion—from Robert Garcia to Frank Beckwith, John Crosby to Andrew Loke, Matthew Flannagan to Janine Idziak, Anne Jeffrey to Elizabeth Anscombe, and more besides. Our intent in summing up so much of the history in short compass has simply been to familiarize readers with some of the rich and fertile history of moral arguments for God's existence.[31]

1 A. C. Ewing, *Value and Reality: The Philosophical Case for Theism* (George Allen & Unwin, 1973), 204.

2 David Elton Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion* (Harper & Brothers, 1957), 116–17.

3 Austin Farrer, *Reflective Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Wipf & Stock, 2012).

4 Basil Mitchell, *Morality, Religious and Secular* (Oxford University Press, 1980).

5 George Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 2nd ed., ed. Louis P. Pojman (Wadsworth, 1995).

6 All now republished by Wipf & Stock.

7 H. P. Owen, *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism* (George Allen & Unwin, 1965); and *The Christian Knowledge of God* (Athlone, 1969).

8 Clement Dore, *Theism* (D. Reidel, 1984).

9 John Warwick Montgomery, born a year after Dore, offered a variety of evidential arguments for God's existence; among them he put forth a moral argument to the effect that classical theism provides the necessary explanation of human dignity and human rights. Montgomery wrote *The Law Above the Law* (New Reformation, 1975) and *Human Rights and Human Dignity* (New Reformation, 2019).

10 Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

11 Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell University Press, 1999), 156.

12 Linda Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). See also Linda Zagzebski, "Does Ethics Need God?," *Faith and Philosophy* 4, no. 3 (1987): 294–303.

13 Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2017). Earlier she had used Jesus as an example of an exemplar, but in this book she casts the theory in a way that's consistent with philosophical naturalism. So religious implications would be more implicit here.

14 C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (Oxford University Press, 2010); and *God and Moral Obligations* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

15 C. Stephen Evans and David Baggett, "Moral Arguments for the Existence of God," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last revised October 4, 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-arguments-god/. I (Dave) helped a bit with this recent revision, but the bulk of the entry remains Stephen's.

16 J. P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism* (SCM, 2009).

17 David Horner and J. P. Moreland, *Metaethics: A Short Companion* (B&H Academic, 2024). Earlier in Moreland's prolific career he also published a debate on God with Kai Nielsen that touched on ethics. See *Does God Exist? A Debate Between Theists and Atheists* (Prometheus Books, 1993).

18 John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* (Clarendon, 1997).

19 John E. Hare, *God's Command* (Oxford University Press, 2015); and *Unity and the Holy Spirit* (Oxford University Press, 2022). One coauthor of this book, William Lane Craig, was also born in 1949, and readers will have occasion to see some of his distinctive contributions to this whole discussion in part 3.

20 Elaborated in his *God's Call: Moral Realism, God's Commands, and Human Autonomy* (Eerdmans, 2001).

21 C. Stephen Layman, “A Moral Argument for the Existence of God,” in *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?*, ed. Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 52.

22 See the last chapter of Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

23 David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (Oxford University Press, 2011); *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning* (Oxford University Press, 2016); *The Moral Argument* (Oxford University Press, 2019); and *The Good, the Right, and the Real: Is Value a Fact?* (Oxford University Press, 2025). The website Moral Apologetics.com has served as a hub of resources on the moral argument for several years now.

24 R. Scott Smith, *In Search of Moral Knowledge: Overcoming the Fact-Value Dichotomy* (IVP Academic, 2014).

25 R. Scott Smith, *Exposing the Roots of Constructivism: Nominalism and the Ontology of Knowledge* (Lexington Books, 2022).

26 His chapter is available online. See Mark D. Linville, “The Moral Argument,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Blackwell, 2009), https://appearedtoblogly.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/linville-mark-22the-moral-argument22.pdf.

27 Paul Copan, “A Moral Argument,” in *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview*, ed. Francis Beckwith, William Lane Craig, and James Porter Moreland (InterVarsity, 2004); Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Baker Books, 2011); Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Baker Books, 2014); and Copan, *Is God a Vindictive Bully? Reconciling Portrayals of God in the Old and New Testaments* (Baker Academic, 2022).

28 Paul Copan, “Reinforcing the Moral Argument: Appealing to the Historical Impact of the Christian Faith,” paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, November 19–21, 2014, San Diego. See also Copan, “The Biblical Worldview Context for Religious Liberty,” in *Religious Liberty: Its Nature, Scope, and Limits*, ed. Angus Menuge (Routledge, 2017), 11–33; Paul Copan and Thom Wolf, “Another Dimension of the Moral Argument: The Voice of Jesus and the Historical Fruits of the

Christian Faith," in *A New Theist Response to the New Atheists*, ed. Joshua Rasmussen and Kevin Vallier, Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies (Routledge, 2020), 131–52.

29 Angus Menuge, "The Failure of Naturalism as a Foundation for Human Rights," Moral Apologetics, December 13, 2014, https://www.moralapologetics.com/wordpress/the-failure-of-naturalism-as-a-foundation-for-human-rights. See also Angus Menuge, ed., *Legitimizing Human Rights: Secular and Religious Perspectives* (Ashgate, 2013); and Menuge, ed., *Religious Liberty and the Law* (Routledge, 2018).

30 For a longer version of this history, see David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *The Moral Argument: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

31 The forthcoming Oxford University Press book edited by John Hare and David Baggett will feature over two dozen contemporaries writing about various aspects of the moral argument and will thereby fill an important gap in the current literature.

PART 2

A Case for Moral Realism

In this section we will defend moral realism, a theory of metaethics. Metaethics is the branch of ethics that explores the status of our moral claims. It asks whether moral judgments express real propositions and, if so, whether any of them is true. And if that is the case, in what sense is it true? It also inquires about what authority, if any, moral claims have on us and what the relationship is between morality and rationality.

Moral realism affirms that there are objective moral truths that do not depend on human culture or opinion. They are, at least in this sense, on a par with objective scientific facts owing to independently existing features of reality. By "moral truths" we are not referring merely to truths about moral beliefs and practices but to moral truths themselves—like that it is wrong to push people off cliffs to kill them for fun.

Moral realists believe that morality is objectively true in a quite robust sense, not true in a merely subjective sense. So moral realism stands in contrast to a variety of perspectives, among them that morality is an entirely misguided venture, that all moral claims are false, that morality has no propositional content at all, and that morality is a function of personal choice or a social construction.

Chapter 6 will discuss the nature of moral realism in more detail, identifying its putative strengths and a range of concerns that are typically expressed about it. Then, in subsequent chapters (7, 8, and 9), we will examine the theoretical pros and cons of rivals to moral

realism: error theory, expressivism, and constructivism, respectively.[1] In the last chapter of this section, we will draw the threads of our discussion together and offer a cumulative case for strong moral realism that we find convincing.

[1] A fuller treatment than what we can provide here would also discuss sensibility theory. There is a chapter devoted to it in David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *The Good, the Right, and the Real: Is Value a Fact?* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

6

What Is Moral Realism?

This chapter will spell out what moral realism is and identify various formulations of what it might look like. Then it will point to and motivate some of the prima facie reasons to accept it and some of the salient reasons to reject it, or at least retain skepticism about it. The chapter will then briefly introduce a range of alternatives to moral realism to be considered in some detail.

The Nature of Moral Realism

Moral realism can be defined as requiring (1) a semantic or cognitivist thesis, (2) an alethic or nonnihilist thesis, (3) an ontic or metaphysical thesis, and then, for our purposes, (4) a nonskeptical thesis. Some familiarity with this language and these ideas will facilitate understanding moving forward. A way to get a handle on the first condition—the *semantic* or *cognitivist thesis*—is to ask if moral sentences are truth-apt. That is, do they express propositions? Another way to ask the question is to ask whether moral judgments have a truth value; in other words, Are they either true or false? Moral realism affirms that at least some of our moral judgments are indeed truth-apt. They express beliefs, and they have a truth value. Moral sentences are what they seem: statements about morality that either correspond with reality or do not. If they do, they are true; if not, they are false.

Such cognitivism distinguishes moral realism from expressivism that, at least in its earliest versions, denies that moral judgments are cognitively meaningful. Moral judgments, according to such expressivists, are neither

true nor false but are rather something like an expression of positive or negative emotions. Expressivism obviously contrasts with the sturdily realist view that moral statements represent moral facts and that they express actual propositions that are true or false.

What about the second condition—the *alethic* or *nonnihilist thesis*? This requirement insists not just that moral judgments are true or false but that at least some of our moral judgments are true. In affirming the alethic thesis, moral realism distinguishes itself from moral error theory, a view historically espoused by J. L. Mackie and, more recently, by Richard Joyce, Jonas Olson, Bart Streumer, and others.[1] Error theorists hold that all moral claims are false: Moral statements express propositions, contrary to what the expressivists say, and possess truth values, but every one of them is false. In contrast, moral realists think that at least some of our moral judgments are true.

More is needed, however. Moral relativism affirms that some moral propositions are true, but it is not a realist account. One version of such a "constructivist" or subjectivist view is that the prevailing moral view in a society renders that view true for that society. Such relativism is just one variant of constructivism, which we will have occasion to discuss later, but the present point is that, like moral realists, moral relativists speak in terms of true moral claims or judgments. Unlike moral realists, however, moral relativists make moral truths depend on the prevailing attitudes or preferences of individuals, cultures, or subcultures. Moral realists are not relativists. They instead believe that there are objective facts of the matter when it comes to what is right or wrong, good or bad, virtuous or vicious.

Moral realism can thus be said to affirm a third requirement of objectivity that we can call the *ontic* (or *metaphysical*) *thesi*s. Whereas the semantic thesis pertains to the nature of moral discourse, and the alethic thesis pertains to the truth of moral claims, the ontic thesis pertains to the character or nature of moral facts. Typically, realists of either naturalist or nonnaturalist stripe underscore something like the stance-independent nature of moral truths. This is to say that their truth does not depend on the attitudes, inclinations, or preferences of human beings. If someone has a duty to perform an action, for example, the person's resistance to discharging his obligation does not diminish the authority of the obligation, nor does it sanction noncompliance.

J. L. Mackie characterized moral realism by suggesting that (at least some) moral truths feature objective prescriptivity. Both features are important here: *objectivity* and *prescriptivity*. Morality is not purely subjective—relative to one's culture or to individuals within that culture. It applies across the board and is not subject to the winds of popularity, caprice of majority rule, or tyranny of individual preference. Morality is not only objective but also at times altogether prescriptive—imposing binding and authoritative prescriptions and proscriptions on our behavior.

This union of objectivity and prescriptivity may well be the most interesting feature of morality. It is also the hardest part of moral realism to defend. Objectivity alone is not very difficult to generate; nor is moral prescriptivity in isolation. But defending their conjunction poses a significant challenge for moral realists. Mackie was not wrong to issue this very challenge. His strategic move was exactly right, and what is at stake is nothing less than the issue of moral authority.

Many might stop right here in their characterization of moral realism: the semantic thesis, the alethic thesis, and the ontic thesis. Morality is cognitivist, sometimes true, and objective. Affirming all three conditions, however, is consistent with a denial of any moral knowledge. To us this seems problematic. Of course, to believe, concerning some field of discourse, that there is an objective fact of the matter is distinct both conceptually and in practice from claiming to know exactly what that fact is. In ethics, as in other areas, we see through a glass darkly and remain susceptible to enough confirmation biases, blinders, and distorting influences that retaining an attitude of epistemic humility is paramount.

Still, any moral realism worth our allegiance requires a nonskeptical constraint. This is a fourth condition for the sort of moral realism we will be discussing. We can know at least some moral propositions. If we are wrong, for example, about the moral atrocity of burning people alive for fun, then our moral realism does not mean much. If we cannot have the requisite confidence to rule anything out from the realm of moral propriety, then the line between moral realism and antirealism practically disappears. Moral realism in such a case is rendered an effete intellectual conjecture with little to no practical punch, purpose, or point.

This means that moral realism that is watered down or easily domesticated will not be our present concern. We will not be defending a

version of moral realism consistent with complete moral skepticism, nor a variant of moral realism that rejects any of the conditions we have discussed. Weaker forms of moral realism—sometimes called minimal or moderate—pick and choose among the conditions specified, but we are interested in categorical oughtness, objective prescriptivity, and robust moral knowledge.

Moral realists come in different stripes, some more "full blown" than others. This book will be especially interested in moral realism in a quite strong sense. To a good first approximation, then, strong moral realism affirms that moral judgments are truth-apt, that some of them are true, that their truth does not depend on the attitudes of human beings, and that some clear moral truths are known. This is to say that strong or robust moral realism affirms the semantic thesis, the alethic thesis, the metaphysical thesis, and the nonskeptical thesis.

Such realism, if it can be defended, arguably provides the relevant evidence for a theistic hypothesis. If morality is reducible to one version of antirealism or another, it becomes much less likely that it can do appreciable evidential work for theism.

Naturalism and Nonnaturalism

Before discussing how we will go about making the case for moral realism, we need to identify an additional distinction among moral realists in order to make clear the variant of moral realism of particular interest to us. G. E. Moore, in his classic *Principia Ethica*, distinguished between naturalist morality and nonnaturalist morality.[2] His favored term for the latter was *metaphysical* morality, but we will employ the term "nonnaturalist." Realism, then, can come in naturalist varieties and nonnaturalist varieties. Our focus in this volume will be on the latter, but let's quickly discuss naturalistic ethics. Giving it its due would require a volume of its own; here we will simply describe it a bit before setting it to the side and pointing to some additional resources for those who wish to explore it further.

Although this section of the book will argue for robust moral realism, and there are naturalist moral realists, naturalistic ethics does not really help our cause. It would not show that God does not exist, but it would show that

morality, even if it is real, does not give us reasons to think that God exists, at least not directly. Perhaps God would be the indirect source of morality in virtue of having created the material world, but that's not the sort of argument that we will advance in this book. Of course, if the naturalist ethics under discussion presupposed naturalism, then that would show that God doesn't exist, but that would be problematically circular. We are starting our analysis by assuming neither that God exists nor that God does not exist.

Moral naturalists, as we are characterizing them, are simply those who adhere to the idea that morality is somehow reducible to what we find in the natural world. The moral realists among them, our focus here, affirm mind-independent, objective moral facts. They are cognitivists who see moral judgments as belief-like mental states that describe the way the world is. They affirm that moral facts exist and that they obtain independent of our understanding them or our stance toward them. Usually, moral naturalism affirms not just the metaphysical component that moral facts are natural facts but also an epistemic commitment that we know moral claims are true in the same way that we know about claims in the sciences. Such realism can come in different varieties; one important salient example is Cornell realism, which accepts the view that moral facts are natural facts, falling within the province of the natural and social sciences.[3]

When discussing moral naturalism, Moore lodged his famous naturalistic fallacy against it. On Moore's analysis, any effort to equate any natural property or combination of natural properties with what is morally good is a mistake. Perhaps there is coextension between the categories, but that does not entail sameness. Moore's so-called open question argument is designed to show the distinction or disconnect between any proposed naturalistic account of goodness and goodness itself. Suppose we say that pleasure is good. Whereas the question "Is good good?" is a closed question, the question "Is pleasure good?" is not. That the latter, but not the former, remains an "open question" reveals, he thought, that goodness and pleasure are not the same. The point is generalizable to any naturalistic proposal for the good. The good, he thought, is rather something beyond garden-variety description, something ineffable and undefinable, analogous in certain respects to something like the color yellow.

Most moral naturalists today reject Moore's heady conception of the good, eschewing it in favor of something less mysterious and more down-to-earth, as we see in Peter Railton's approach. They also can employ insights from direct reference theorists like Saul Kripke, Hilary Putnam, and the like, to add sophistication to their analysis of the relationship between language and that to which language refers. Consider the analogy with the natural kind *water*. What we can know a priori is that whatever liquid we find in oceans and rivers, the stuff we drink and bathe with, is water, but it takes empirical investigation to discover water's molecular composition. Its phenomenal features fix its reference but underdetermine its essential nature.

Likewise we know that what stirs our admiration and proactive attitudes in the relevant way is goodness, but, according to Richard Boyd and others, its essential nature remains to be determined, open to empirical investigation. The moral naturalists are convinced that naturalistic accounts of moral goodness are on offer that can accomplish the task. Perhaps it is not just one natural property but rather a complex combination of natural properties. The semantics of natural kinds can be deployed to answer the conceptual challenges posed by the naturalistic fallacy and open question argument. For example, "Is water water?" is a closed question, whereas "Is water H_2O?" was long an open question requiring empirical confirmation. The relevant concepts are indeed distinct.

Apart from construing the challenge along conceptualist lines, though, the challenge can also be interpreted metaphysically. A metaphysical interpretation of the open question may well be justified, for this basic reason: Naturalist properties by their nature seem intrinsically inadequate to account for something like moral normativity. As Russ Shafer-Landau puts it, "There are genuine features of our world that remain forever outside the purview of the natural sciences. Moral facts are such features. They introduce an element of normativity that cannot be captured in the records of the natural sciences. They tell us what we *ought* to do; how we *should* behave; what is *worth* pursuing; what *reasons* we have; what is *justifiable* and what not. There is no science that can inform us of such things."[4]

Naturalists who are moral realists agree that there are facts by virtue of which moral locutions (like "wrong") have determinate content. The facts

to which they point are all natural facts, though, and natural facts arguably fail to account for the sort of normativity at the heart of ethical claims. Surely moral naturalism can account for some legitimate pushback against inappropriate normative claims, but the moral naturalist intends to insist that every bit of such pushback must be natural. Advocates of the moral argument, in contrast, argue that this is not so. At least some of the resistance is nonnatural. This will be our claim in this book, and at the heart of our conviction is the difficulty that naturalism encounters in accounting for moral normativity. Natural facts strike us as ineliminably nonnormative. As we will argue, a nonnatural account, specifically a theistic one, provides the better grounding for moral normativity.

This is the metaphysical import of Moore's reasoning from earlier. As J. P. Moreland and David Horner put it,

> The central intuition of Moore's reasoning is that every attempt to reduce moral properties to nonmoral properties fails and must fail because that reduction leaves out what is most essential to moral properties—their irreducible normativity. Indeed, because all properties (according to naturalism) are natural, scientific properties, normativity of all kinds (not just moral normativity) turns out to be impossible. Since normativity, including moral normativity, is a real feature of the world, however, naturalism fails. As Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga puts it, "[Naturalism's] Achilles' Heel (in addition to its deplorable falsehood) is that it has no room for *normativity*. There is no room, within naturalism, for right or wrong, or good or bad."[5]

At any rate, we think that the evidence of morality points in a different direction. We will leave defenders of moral naturalism to defend their own views; here we will mainly be laying out our own vision about morality and the evidential direction in which it points.

With that brief introduction to moral realism, let us now consider its main metaethical rivals.

[1] J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin Books, 1977); Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (MIT Press, 2007); Jonas Olson, *Moral Error Theory: History/Critique/Defence* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Bart Streumer, *Unbelievable Errors: An Error Theory About All Normative Judgements* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

[2] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (1903; repr., Dover, 2004).

[3] A distinction holds between *reductive* moral naturalists and *nonreductive* moral naturalists, but both variants of moral naturalism would answer the question, “Are values facts?” in the affirmative, specifically natural facts. Cornell realism is a view in metaethics, associated with the work of Richard Boyd, Nicholas Sturgeon, and David Brink, who earned his doctorate at Cornell University.

[4] Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.

[5] David A. Horner and J. P. Moreland, *Metaethics: A Short Companion* (B&H Academic, 2024), 110–11. Horner and Moreland quote Alvin Plantinga, afterword to *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Eerdmans, 1998), 356.

7

Moral Error Theory

Error theories can be defined by their allegiance to three central claims: (1) Our moral judgments aim to represent moral facts, (2) there are no moral facts, and so (3) none of our moral judgments are true. Historically there have not been many error theorists, probably because of the radical nature of the claim that, quite literally, nothing is ever either immoral (not even genocide or egregiously predatory behavior) or morally right (not even protecting the innocent, caring for the vulnerable, or the like).

Owing to the relative paucity of error theorists historically, most discussions of moral error theory begin with the Australian philosopher J. L. Mackie's seminal *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*.[1] Jonas Olson fills in a bit more of the historical background of error theory by discussing some of the more or less influential twentieth-century figures like Axel Hägerström, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Richard Robinson.[2]

The Nature of Moral Error Theory

Moral error theorists affirm all four of the following theses:

1. We experience moral wrongness (e.g.) as an objective feature of the world.
2. This experience has its origin in some non-perceptual faculty; in particular, upon observing certain actions and characters (etc.) we have an affective attitude (e.g., the emotion of disapproval) that brings about the experience described in 1.
3. In fact, moral wrongness does not exist in the world.
4. When we utter sentences of the form "X is morally wrong," we are misdescribing the world; we are in error.[3]

The first thesis concerns moral *phenomenology*, a matter of interior moral experience. Such experiences underdetermine whether what is experienced is mind-dependent or mind-independent, subjective or an experience of something objective, or whether moral properties actually exist. The second thesis is a matter of moral *psychology* offering, in Olson's words, "a causal explanation of this moral phenomenology."[4] The third thesis pertains to moral *ontology* (the matter of what morally exists), and the fourth concerns moral *semantics* (how moral language is used). Mackie made clear, in his articulation of error theory, that his primary concern was ontological, the factual question of whether there are objective moral facts. Semantic questions of the meanings of moral terms are not at the core of the theory as he understood it.

R. M. Hare famously trivialized the ontological question: "Think of one world into whose fabric values are objectively built; and think of another in which those values have been annihilated. And remember that in both worlds the people in them go on being concerned about the same things—there is no difference in the 'subjective' concern which people have for things, only in their 'objective' value. Now I ask, 'What is the difference in the states of affairs in these two worlds?' Can any answer be given except 'None whatever'?"[5]

Mackie demurred, arguing that there is indeed an important difference between the two states of affairs. After all, he wrote, "in the one there is something that backs up and validates some of the subjective concern which people have for things, in the other there is not."[6] Mackie likened Hare's inability to recognize the important distinction to the positivistic denial that there is a difference between a real world and a Berkeleian mind-dependent one.

Noncognitivists, such as the classical expressivists discussed in the next chapter, readily affirm theses 1–3 but balk at 4 because, so they argue, moral claims express noncognitive attitudes and do not describe the world at all. Rather than 4, they claim that a moral judgment like "Murder is wrong" does not describe anything. Some expressivists might wish to reject 3 by appealing to a deflationary or disquotational analysis of truth. Again, by contrast, error theorists affirm all four theses.

Olson introduces a few additional wrinkles to this discussion and along the way describes error theory like this: "Error theory about some area of

thought or discourse, (D), is commonly defined as the view that D involves systematically false beliefs and that, as a consequence, all D-judgments, or some significant subset thereof, are false."[7] So standard moral error theory is usually thought to entail the view that moral thinking, in particular, involves systematically false beliefs—typically about moral properties and facts—and that, as a consequence, all moral judgments, or some significant subset thereof, are false.[8]

Nonstandard variants of the theory also abound, but here we will direct our attention, as Mackie did, to standard moral error theory.

Mackie's Relativity Argument

One quick preliminary before getting to Mackie pertains to the distinction between metaethical and normative claims, and this point will serve as an effective segue into Mackie's exposition of error theory. This is the same distinction that Mackie wished to make in laying out error theory, insisting that it is a theory that applies only to metaethical or second-order moral claims.

The claim Mackie wished to defend is that there are no objective values, which he took to be a metaethical, or second-order, claim. "The claim that values are not objective, are not part of the fabric of the world, is meant to include not only moral goodness, which might be most naturally equated with moral value, but also other things that could be more loosely called moral values or disvalues—rightness and wrongness, duty, obligation, an action's being rotten and contemptible, and so on."[9]

What Mackie did not wish to do was extend moral skepticism to (what he called) first-order claims that he took as straightforward descriptive ones. That acts of cruelty and kindness objectively possess different qualities, he wrote, is undeniable. This is an objective fact able to be apprehended with clarity from attentive empirical observation. Mackie had no intention to deny this, even though he was not convinced that there is an objective disparity in moral value between them. "The present issue is with regard to the objectivity specifically of value, not with regard to the objectivity of those natural, factual, differences on the basis of which differing values are assigned."[10]

In one sense, this seems eminently obvious, but on closer examination, when normative claims are taken as robust assertions about what morally ought or ought not to be the case, it raises a serious doubt about Mackie's dichotomy. His claim that first- and second-order moral views "are not merely distinct but completely independent" strains credulity. At the least it does not seem obvious that if error theory is true as a second-order account, then it would have no implications whatsoever at the normative level of ethics.[11] A standard interpretation of Mackie's account is that a first-order moral claim like "Torture is morally wrong" is indeed false. With that preliminary done, we have said enough to set the stage for our discussion of Mackie.

With his characteristically liquid prose, Mackie offered five reasons to reject objective morality. The first is a relativity argument, then three considerations based on the odd features of morality, and the fifth reason is his account for why people stubbornly cling to notions of moral objectivity despite the fact that doing so is, to his thinking, mistaken.

His relativity argument is based on the widely fluctuating moral beliefs and practices throughout the world and history, which he thought moral skepticism accounts for better than moral realism (objective morality) does. One might be tempted to interpret his relativity argument along this line:

1. Moral beliefs and practices fluctuate a great deal.
2. If so, then there is no objective morality.
3. So, there is no objective morality.

Then one can subject the argument to critical scrutiny with the usual well-worn objections. For example, differences about moral beliefs do not entail differences in or denials of moral truth, any more than differences do in other fields of study. Besides, if relativity of belief about something means there are no truths about it, then the argument would be self-defeating, since neither 2 nor 3 is universally agreed on.

Mackie, though, did not lay claim to that sort of airtight connection. Rather, he was offering only "indirect evidence," as he put it, arguing that his error theory could *better explain* moral disagreements and differences than moral realism can. So such criticisms of Mackie seem wide of the

mark by treating his *better* explanation approach as an effort at providing the *only* explanation.

Besides, Mackie thought there was a relevant disanalogy between disagreements about history or science, on the one hand, and ethics, on the other. In the former, the disagreements do not vitiate the existence of objective truths to be known, at least in principle. The disagreements result from merely speculative inferences or explanatory hypotheses based on inadequate evidence, but he thought it implausible to think the same about ethics. “Disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people’s adherence to and participation in different ways of life.”[12]

“In short,” he concluded, “the argument from relativity has some force simply because the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values.”[13]

Mackie then anticipated an important objection along these lines: Perhaps what is not relative about morality are very general basic principles recognized at least implicitly to some extent in every society. For example, “the principle of universalizability, perhaps, or the rule that one ought to conform to the specific rules of any way of life in which one takes part, from which one profits, and on which one relies, or some utilitarian principle of doing what tends, or seems likely, to promote the general happiness.”[14] Such general principles applied to specific and concrete circumstances and contexts would likely feature some latitude when it comes to the formulation of specific moral rules.

Mackie replied that such an appeal cannot well account for the confidence with which an assortment of specific moral guides to conduct are taken as authoritative. For many such principles are not thought derivative from more general axioms or ideals but are able to be recognized more directly and less inferentially. This makes sense, Mackie thought, of appeals to intuitions or moral sense rather than to the deliverances of reason itself. For such reasons Mackie was convinced that the argument from relativity remains in full force.

A later chapter will deal with relativistic models of morality at greater length, but for now just a word is in order. Among the moral data in need of explanation, as Mackie rightly discerned, is significant moral disagreement.

Perhaps less prominent in his analysis is the felt need to address the significant swath of moral agreement that can be discovered both throughout human history and all around the world, including no small number of rather concrete moral axioms and principles.

This is the significance of the appendix in C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*, after he had taken the trouble to compare the ethical codes from a wide range of times and places—from Egypt, India, China, Greece and Rome, Scandinavia, the Anglo-Saxons, Mosaic law, and the New Testament. Among the general headings of what he deemed these principles of universal morality—the "*Tao*," he dubbed it—were the following: beneficence toward people in general and toward specific persons; duties to parents, elders, ancestors, spouse, children, posterity; justice; honesty and truthfulness; mercy; and magnanimity.[15]

By Mackie's own admission, however, the relativity argument was merely preliminary. His *main* argument against moral realism was still to come: the so-called trifold "argument from queerness" ("queerness" is meant in the traditional sense of "oddness").[16] To this argument we will turn momentarily, but first one last word about moral disagreement that is germane to the project of this book. Persistent disagreement obtains not just with respect to first-order moral questions of various sorts but with regard to metaethics too. Moreover, the debates among and between adherents of these disparate theories can sometimes seem interminable or even practically incommensurable. Arguments and counterarguments and rejoinders abound, and rarely is there anything like a knockout blow to do away with a theory altogether. This can be discouraging, but from it we should glean both a warning and a reminder. The warning is to not just remain in our comfort zones, listening only to those with whom we already agree. The reminder is that disagreement usually does not mean that there is no truth to the matter. Moral theory is hard, and there are no shortcuts—and no single volume will clear everything up—but it is worth our time and effort to think it through, and prospects for progress are bright.

The Argument from Queerness and the Enduring Appeal of Moral Objectivity

Mackie's "argument from queerness" has two parts, a metaphysical part and an epistemic part. The metaphysical component itself has two aspects, so all told this argument features three parts. The two metaphysical ways that Mackie thought morality to be odd are these: Morality would have to be binding and authoritative apart from one's own desires and preferences, and morality would have to supervene on natural features of the world. The epistemic sense of moral oddness pertains to the challenge of accounting for knowledge of morality understood in that way. He thought realism likely to require a specific moral sense, which seemed to him unlikely and ontologically indulgent.

Mackie constructed a basic formulation of both the metaphysical and the epistemic concern like this: "If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing anything else."[17] Let us discuss Mackie's metaphysical concerns, each in turn, starting with the authority of morality obtaining apart from one's desires and preferences.

As the expressivists had done, Mackie found part of his inspiration in the iconic writings of none less than G. E. Moore. Moore thought that between the naturalistic fallacy and open question argument, prospects for a naturalistic account of ethics were unavoidably dim.[18] So he gravitated to thinking of morality in unanalyzable nonnaturalistic terms. Such talk of nonnaturalism, however, can sound to some rather inexplicable, exuding a connotation of "unreal." A strong commitment even just to methodological naturalism effectively confines one's search for moral explanations to the naturalistic realm; any departure or deviation can seem otiose and obtuse, indulgent and infelicitous.

Nothing so ambitious as logical positivism or its verifiability criterion is needed to look askance at appeals to nonnaturalism. Mackie himself rejected such a criterion of meaning as well as its application to morality. He did not consider assertions that there are objective values or intrinsically prescriptive entities to be cognitively meaningless; rather, he regarded them false for being irremediably odd. He considered Plato's Forms the archetype of objective values:

> The Form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive; something's being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it. An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it. Similarly, if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of action would have not-to-be-doneness somehow built into it.[19]

Mackie thought that Hume's point that it is our desires and passions, rather than reason alone, that motivate behavior comports nicely with his own point. To the charge that values have a distinctive power to motivate, Mackie held, Hume would need to augment his analysis by appealing to something like the argument from queerness. For values would have to be, if they possessed such unique motivating power, something on a quite different order from anything else of which we are aware.

One way to encapsulate what is at stake at this juncture of the discussion is to speak of the authority of morality. This is what Mackie was getting at when he discussed morality as prescriptively binding. In the next chapter we will see how R. M. Hare tapped into the notion of Kantian universalizability: When we make a moral decision, we are essentially prescribing that everyone else in relevantly similar circumstances make the same decision. But Hare also denied the existence of moral facts, so what he ended up with was something like prescriptions without authority. Mackie did not adopt this watered-down version of ethics; he was convinced that too superficial an analysis, rather than explaining ethics, would only explain it away. Mackie thought that a distinctive feature of morality is that it is not only prescriptive but authoritative. It is prescriptively binding. This is also what makes it so odd. In essence, then, Mackie found dubious the notion that there are any true moral claims that are, as the right analysis of morality requires, genuinely authoritative.

The second aspect of metaphysical oddness Mackie accentuated, recall, was that morality would somehow need to be linked to natural features of the world. "What is the connection between the natural fact that an action is a piece of deliberate cruelty—say, causing pain just for fun—and the moral fact that it is wrong?" he asked. Mackie did not think it could be an entailment, yet it is also not merely that the two features happen to occur together. "The wrongness must somehow be 'consequential' or

‘supervenient’; it is wrong because it is a piece of deliberate cruelty. But just what *in the world* is signified by this ‘because’?”[20] Among the moral data that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau identify as in need of explanation is this very matter of what connects moral properties with the natural properties on which they are thought to supervene. Mackie seemed wholly correct to raise this very question.

Incidentally, interesting to note is that Mackie anticipated the objection some might wish to raise that his invoking the specter of the more exotic products of philosophical fancy—Platonic Forms, nonnatural qualities, self-evident relations of fitness, faculties of intuition, and the like—stacks the deck against moral realism. Did he consider his argument equally effective against more garden-variety moral claims to objectivity captured in such everyday language as “You must do this,” “You cannot do that,” “obligation,” “unjust,” and “disgraceful”?

Mackie admitted it is not obvious that his argument is as forceful against these casual locutions, but he thought he could explain why. Such forms of speech, he argued, do not isolate the objective prescriptivity but are mingled with a variety of other things, like relations to desires and feelings, prevailing contextual standards, reasoning about ways to achieve certain ends, and so forth. There is nothing queer about such things, and “under cover of them the claim for moral authority may pass unnoticed. But if I am right in arguing that it is ordinarily there, and is therefore very likely to be incorporated almost automatically in philosophical accounts of ethics which systematize our ordinary thought even in such apparently innocent terms as these, it needs to be examined, and for this purpose it needs to be isolated and exposed as it is by the less cautious philosophical reconstructions.”[21]

Lastly, in terms of the epistemic oddness of moral realism, Mackie lumped Moore’s nonnaturalism in with what he deemed discredited appeals to mysterious and epistemically obscure faculties of moral intuition. Although Mackie thought that most could see the problems with intuitionism—primarily some sort of special faculty for apprehending moral truths—he thought it less commonly recognized that this central problem besets any and every objectivist view of values. Even if such views do not adopt a simplistic picture of moral epistemology according to which moral judgments are made or problems solved by just intuiting the answer, still the process of coming to discern the content of allegedly objective moral

truths involves some such intuitive input. As Mackie put it, “When we ask the awkward question, how we can be aware of this authoritative prescriptivity, of the truth of these distinctively ethical premises or of the cogency of this distinctively ethical pattern of reasoning, none of our ordinary accounts of sensory perception or introspection or the framing and confirming of explanatory hypotheses or inference or logical construction or conceptual analysis, or any combination of these, will provide a satisfactory answer; ‘a special sort of intuition’ is a lame answer, but it is the one to which the clear-headed objectivist is compelled to resort.”[22]

Bearing in mind the supervenience concern, Mackie added that it is not enough to postulate a faculty that “sees” moral wrongness. “Something must be postulated which can see at once the natural features that constitute the cruelty, and the wrongness, and the mysterious consequential link between the two. . . . How much simpler and more comprehensible the situation would be if we could replace the moral quality with some sort of subjective response which could be causally related to the detection of the natural features on which the supposed quality is said to be consequential?”[23]

Before discussing this central matter of moral authority further, a summary of Mackie’s fifth and culminating consideration in favor of error theory is in order. On the basis of his previous arguments, especially the metaphysical and epistemic strangeness of objective moral authority, Mackie thought the last piece of the puzzle involved explaining how such authority has come to be so widely believed and is so resistant to criticism. Mackie offered several suggestive possibilities.

Whereas the language-centric expressivists tended to attribute enduring beliefs in moral objectivity to the human penchant for reification of misleading moral language, rendering something abstract as real, Mackie looked instead to moral psychology and phenomenology. He appealed to what Hume called the mind’s “propensity to spread itself on external objects.” Interpreting morality as realist naturally arises from the projection or objectification of moral attitudes. Mackie considered the process analogous to the “pathetic fallacy,” reading one’s feelings into their objects.[24]

In the moral case, though, there is also a social dynamic at work. Prevailing community standards of behavior exert pressure to conform and

incentives to internalize them. Motives to objectify them include the ways in which certain behaviors are conducive to, and others detract from, harmonious social interaction. There are thus social reasons for wanting morality to be authoritative.[25]

Moreover, Mackie argued, even more important than the projection of feelings are wants and demands. He invoked Hobbes's conjecture that the object of a man's desire or appetite is what he dubs "good." "We get the notion of something's being objectively good, or having intrinsic value, by reversing the direction of dependence here, by making the desire depend upon the goodness, instead of the goodness on the desire." We easily confuse a thing's objective desirability with our sense of objective value.[26]

Mackie was also convinced that there is an important historical twist to the full explanation of the widespread convictions about moral realism. Notions of strong moral proscriptions and prescriptions, that some actions are not just wrong but wicked or forbidden, and the like, he thought, can almost certainly be traced to religious influences. With the diminution of religion, the vestigial imperatival force of moral language had resulted in a law without a lawgiver, retaining its supposed authority but having lost its foundations. Convinced by Elizabeth Anscombe's famous analysis of modern moral theory, Mackie took to heart her concern that traditional moral language—like non-Aristotelian concepts of moral obligation—had merely "mesmeric" force with a "delusive appearance of content."[27]

Again, though, Mackie was quick to add that persisting beliefs in moral objectivity even after belief in a divine legislator had faded is tenacious. The picture is a complicated one, in which several influences have converged to fortify ongoing convictions about objective and authoritative morality. Since such explanations are so readily on offer, though, this fact, when combined with the earlier arguments for error theory, makes plausible and justified the acceptance of error theory and rejection of moral realism.

Varieties of Alleged Moral Queerness

Olson lays out four versions of queerness objections, resisting the first three while taking the fourth to provide a good reason to reject moral realism and adopt error theory instead. Let us quickly consider the first three and then

turn our attention to the fourth, which resides at the center of this important question of moral authority.

Olson begins by pointing out that, by the time Mackie arrived at discussing the queerness objection, he had set naturalistic ethics to the side. The target of the argument, as he conceived it, was nonnatural ethics. Mackie thought that the eventual result of Moore's intuitionism was an undermining of good as nonnatural and unanalyzable—and thus mysterious if not inscrutable. The ontologically odd features of moral properties and relations did not make Mackie think assertions about them meaningless, but false. But note that he largely deferred to Moore's semantic analysis (though not his presumed truth value). In the discussion to follow, then, what needs to be remembered is that the conflict should mainly be understood along the lines of error theory versus a nonnatural account of moral realism.

The first version of the queerness argument is what Olson calls the supervenience objection, predicated on two conceptual supervenience theses:

S1. Necessarily, for any item *x* that has a moral property, *M*, *x* ultimately has *M* in virtue of some natural property.

S2. Necessarily, for any two distinct items, *x* and *y*, if *x* and *y* are exactly alike in natural respects, *x* and *y* are alike in moral respects.

Olson does not want to beg the question against supernaturalist views according to which moral properties supervene on supernatural properties like being commanded by God. So "natural properties" are understood expansively as either naturalistic or supernaturalistic.

The challenge arises for nonnatural ethical accounts when the discussion moves away from concepts to properties, most specifically, the ontological implications of S1 and S2. How is the covariance of a natural property (like torturing a cat) and a moral property (like wrongness) to be explained? Mackie said nonnaturalists are committed to "synthetic necessary connections" between distinct properties. The reason such connections are thought to be metaphysically odd is something like "Hume's Dictum," which says there cannot be relations of necessary coextension between distinct properties because they would be irremediably odd.

Olson, interestingly enough, does not endorse this version of the queerness argument, mainly for this reason: The argument essentially depends on Hume's Dictum, so its effectiveness is held hostage to whether the suggested counterexamples to it work.[28] So he thinks nonnatural accounts of ethics can escape this objection unscathed; an example of such ethics that he uses for an effective counterexample to Hume's Dictum is nonnatural realism predicated on hedonistic utilitarianism.

The issue that we would like to explore for a moment in this connection, though, is this: In *The Miracle of Theism*, Mackie considered a different sort of nonnaturalism—namely, theism.[29] He broached the issue there of whether theistic assumptions might provide the needed explanation of the aforementioned synthetic necessary connections. It is not our intention here to make the case that theism is the best way to go; we have in mind the less ambitious goal of merely showing that such a possibility remains a viable, and not altogether remote, option.

Mackie frankly admitted that if we look at moral thinking "from the outside, as a phenomenon to be understood and explained," there is potential for a moral argument for God:

> If we adopted moral objectivism, we should have to regard the relations of supervenience which connect values and obligations with their natural grounds as synthetic; they would then be in principle something that a god might conceivably create; and since they would otherwise be a very odd sort of thing, the admitting of them would be an inductive ground for admitting also a god to create them. There would be something here in need of explanation, and a being with the power to create what lies outside the bounds of natural plausibility or even possibility might well be the explanation we require. Moral values, their objectivity and their supervenience, would be a continuing miracle . . . , a constant intrusion into the natural world.[30]

Of course, Mackie himself remained unconvinced, both because of his Humean-inspired skepticism about miracles and because of his error theory. It is telling, however, that he thought that, if moral realism held, it would provide some inductive reason to believe in God's reality.[31] Theism could provide just the sort of needed explanation for the relevant asymmetric dependence relation of moral properties on nonmoral ones. This is just the point C. Stephen Evans, echoing George Mavrodes, makes when he writes, "If the universe includes God, and it must if moral obligations are divine commands, and God is a moral being, then it hardly seems odd that moral

qualities should appear to be ‘deep’ ones, and it will be unsurprising that humans have capacities to grasp such qualities.”[32]

Appropriately, then, the second variant of the queerness objection that Olson explores pertains to moral knowledge. The point of the argument is that we do not possess knowledge of moral facts and relations. Recall Mackie’s concern that the mental faculty by which we come to knowledge of wrongness and other moral properties would have to be metaphysically peculiar and prima facie implausible in excelsis. But as Olson points out, even Mackie himself wrote that, for the intuitionists, “there is no need to think of this ‘special faculty’ as a separate organ of the mind. As Richard Price says, all that is required is that the understanding, the aspect of our minds which can discover objective truths, *has the ability* to discover, among others, this particular sort of necessary truth of supervenience.”[33]

Early sentimentalists like Francis Hutcheson were surely susceptible to the charge of epistemic indulgence, but most eighteenth-century rationalists as well as most contemporary intuitionists like Michael Huemer chalk moral knowledge up to rather garden-variety operations of the mind: the ability to understand and to think.

Olson points out that if Mackie’s real concern was synthetic a priori know-ledge, this variant of the queerness argument (like the first) accomplishes too much. For the argument quickly extends beyond moral judgments. Much philosophical knowledge tends to be synthetic a priori, Olson points out. “Standard examples of synthetic truths thought to be knowable by a priori intuition include ‘Nothing can be red and green all over at the same time’ and the laws and inference rules of logic, such as the law of non-contradiction and *modus ponens*.”[34]

Besides, if skepticism about such knowledge per se is the culprit, it would show that the epistemic argument does not stand on its own. It is not at all clear that the way we come by moral knowledge is, in Mackie’s words, “utterly different” from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else. So because of its failure to isolate uniquely queer features of moral and normative properties and facts, this version of the argument falls flat.

The third formulation of the queerness argument pertains to the matter of moral motivation and applies uniquely to moral considerations. Recall how Mackie, using Platonic Forms as his model, insisted that moral realism entails that goodness has a “to-be-pursuedness” built into it. “Something’s

being good both *tells* the person who knows this to pursue it and *makes* him pursue it."[35] The direction and motivation are not a function of the person's predilections or proclivities but rather are furnished by the nature of the good itself.

Note that Mackie thought morality should be understood as providing both authoritative direction (a normative matter) and motivation (a psychological matter). Although Mackie did not distinguish sharply between normative reasons and motivating reasons, most philosophers today do; so the version of the argument from queerness about to be discussed will focus only on the motivational matter. The next section will take up normativity.

A natural and common assumption concerning Mackie's motivation argument made by various expositors is that it derived from two commitments: a Humean theory of motivation and the thesis of *motivation internalism*. A Humean view of motivation is that what spurs one to action is never mere belief, but emotions, desires, preferences, and the like.[36] Motivation internalism is the notion that there is a necessary connection between making a moral judgment and being to some extent motivated to act in accordance with it.

Mackie, however, actually rejected a Humean theory of motivation: "There might be some non-ordinary sort of what was still factual information, some special form of belief or even knowledge supplied by a moral sense as the objective interpretation understands it, which does make moral distinctions that can in and of themselves influence action."[37] "[The] psychological thesis [that] motivation always involves a desire as well as belief [is overstated]. The belief in objective moral requirements, made explicit by such writers as Price and Clarke and Reid, but implicit in much ordinary thinking, can in this curious way act as a motive on its own, even if . . . that belief is false."[38] Most tellingly, "it is evident that there can be sets of moral and factual beliefs which are, by themselves, motives to action."[39]

For this reason, Olson offers this interpretation of Mackie's motivation argument: Although some beliefs can give rise to motivation, moral beliefs are thought to guarantee it, and that would be strange indeed. Mackie seemed to think that the nonnaturalist moral realist was committed to insisting that anyone relevantly acquainted with moral facts would have

motivation to comply with them, though Mackie himself arguably did not adopt motivation internalism. He thought no beliefs guaranteed motivation, and, as Olson puts it, “moral belief is not necessarily linked to motivation.”[40] Mackie arguably made appeal instead to the Socratic doctrine that knowing the good entails motivation to do the good in order to drive home his point that moral facts possessing such motivating power would be queer.

Does this argument work? Likely not. A moral realist can handily accommodate the phenomenon of people becoming relevantly acquainted with moral facts and remaining unmoved by them. Not every moral infraction is committed out of ignorance; some might know the deliverances of morality and violate them anyway. Amoralists do it on a regular basis, but the phenomenon is wider than that. It is not unreasonable to think that all of us on occasion have exhibited weakness of the will (*akrasia*), knowing to do right but refraining, or knowing not to do wrong and doing it anyway. If a clear-eyed vision of the contents of morality were sufficient to ensure obedience to its dictates, then mere acquisition of the relevant knowledge would be enough to ensure complete moral maturation, which seems patently unrealistic.

Mackie assumed that nonnaturalist moral realists combine descriptive and prescriptive elements in their theory in such a way that conflates normativity and motivation. But as Olson puts it, “Non-naturalists who are also externalists about moral motivation maintain that just as we can fail to be motivated by true or false judgments about subjective and conventional reasons and requirements, we can fail to be motivated by true or false judgments about objective and non-conventional, or irreducibly normative, reasons and requirements.”[41]

Irreducible Normativity

The fourth and last way to interpret Mackie’s queerness argument is the one that Olson thinks has the most potential, and it arrives at the central feature of morality in need of explanation: its binding prescriptive authority, what Olson calls “irreducible normativity.” Reducible normativity pertains to standards that apply to specific domains, like etiquette or the rules of

boxing. Irreducible normativity invokes standards that dictate behavior irrespective of an agent's desires to comply or conform (perhaps some might wish to employ the aforementioned locution "stance-independent").

Descriptions can vary, but they all try to narrow their focus to something like authority: binding prescriptivity, strong categorical imperatives, noninstitutional oughts and reasons that really bind agents, practical clout or "oomph" (as Richard Joyce puts it).[42] Olson used to speak in terms of categorical reasons but now favors this language: "Moral facts are queer in that they are or entail facts that count in favor of or require certain courses of behavior, where the favoring relation is irreducibly normative."[43]

Error theorists tend to agree with moral realists when it comes to the meaning of moral claims, and they agree, too, that morality is a cognitivist matter. Moral claims have a truth value, and they are what they appear to be: authoritative, binding prescriptions and proscriptions (among other things). As Olson puts it, nonnatural realists and error theorists agree on the "conceptual claim" that moral facts are or entail irreducibly normative reasons.

Where error theorists demur from the nonnaturalist moral realists, though, is on the ontology of morality. The former think that there is no good reason to think that such odd entities as moral facts—with their presumed authority that obtains irrespective of the agent's desires—actually exist. There are no irreducibly normative reasons in reality. So as a result, moral claims are taken to be categorically false. Naturalist moral realists (like the Cornell realists) attempt to demystify morality, but Olson (rightly, we think) reiterates Mackie's concern that such accounts leave out the "categorical quality" of moral judgments.

In terms of the debate between nonnaturalists and error theorists, their disagreement can easily be seen as intractable, despite the fact that their views on moral semantics largely coincide. Whereas the error theorists see normative reasons as unavoidably odd and metaphysically mysterious, the nonnaturalists assume as axiomatic the authority of morality. The realists insist that if such authority requires some rich ontology, so be it—one person's modus ponens is another's modus tollens. As Olson puts it, nonnaturalists "could maintain that it is a fundamental fact about reality that there are irreducibly normative reason relations, and they could refuse head-on to admit that there is anything *queer* about such relations." (David Enoch

denies such queerness, for example.) The standoff can easily seem to result in a stalemate where they "stare incredulously" at each other. [44]

Error Theory in Retrospect

By way of some overall reflections on error theory, let us begin by paying it some compliments. To our thinking, the view has several strengths. Its moral semantics are solid; its advocates do not settle for watering down morality and, in the process, defanging and domesticating it. To the contrary, a recurring subtext of their analysis tends to be that, if moral realism were true, that would be an important fact revelatory of the nature of reality. It would tell us something vitally important. Mackie went so far as to suggest that moral realism would provide powerful inductive reason to take theism seriously.

Of course, this is half of the moral argument. It is the other half with which error theorists disagree: that there really are moral truths. By "moral truths," remember, they mean something rather specific. They are not content to settle for prescriptivity without authority. Moral realism, as they construe it, requires both of these. It involves categorical imperatives, authoritative moral truths, and binding prescriptive values. Such imperatives and irreducible normativity, of course, are exactly what is thought to raise the specter of metaphysical oddness.

This point reminds us of perhaps the central challenge confronting moral apologists. On the one hand, they need to appeal to a quite robust sense of moral realism—of the type that error theorists describe—if it is to possess evidential weight for God's existence. On the other hand, the moral facts in question should not stand in such obvious need of a theistic grounding that skeptics about supernaturalism would not be inclined to believe in them. As a result, most versions of naturalistic ethics, though dubbed "moral realist," would not be adequate to undergird the moral argument for God's existence.

Following Mackie's way of laying out his argument, the present discussion mostly involves comparing and contrasting error theory and nonnaturalistic moral realism. They agree on moral semantics and on the nature of robust moral realism but part ways on the matter of moral metaphysics. The error theorists deny that there are prescriptively binding

moral facts, while these moral realists affirm that there are. Let us quickly review the two main strategies that moral realists typically use against error theory.

One response is the “partners in crime” approach, which says that if moral facts are ontologically odd, they are not alone. Mathematical, logical, and epistemic facts are in the same boat. So if morality goes, it is not all that goes. Hilary Putnam is one among others who find this argument convincing, and later we will look at Terence Cuneo’s argument for moral realism that takes this approach.

The other approach is what has come to be called a “Moorean” approach, according to which we have better reason to believe in moral facts than to believe in the sorts of considerations that produce error theory. Such Moorean arguments essentially involve plausibility comparisons. For example, which claim do we have more confidence in: that we have a categorical moral obligation never to torture children for fun or that binding prescriptive moral facts are so mysterious and inexplicable that we rationally ought to refrain from believing in them?

We do not intend to ask that question in a way that stacks the deck in favor of moral realism, but the use of an example like child torture is obviously intentional. It is also important, we think, because it speaks to the aforementioned point about the need for morality to be readily accessible to those who do not already subscribe to supernaturalism. Most people, believers and unbelievers alike, do not hesitate to say that some conduct is morally beyond the pale.

This common occurrence gives us reason to think that, epistemologically speaking, morality is more bottom up than top down. Folks from a wide array of worldview perspectives can and do agree on basic moral principles. This is an important response to the factual premise of arguments from relativity, a topic we will consider in more detail later. Our point is not to try settling difficult metaethical debates by appealing to “folk beliefs” about morality but simply to point out that, empirically speaking, convictions about objective ethics are widespread. This does not settle the question about the right metaethical analysis. It leaves that question underdetermined one way or the other, but it is at least telling that error theory flies in the face of most people’s pretheoretical commitments of deep ingression. Error

theory would dictate that we jettison and eschew them, and this requires quite a powerful argument.

That point, though, is just one of several that needs to be emphasized here. We do not pretend to have a single knockdown argument against error theory. At the crux of this debate, after all, are issues in at least close vicinity to "first principles," fundamental beliefs that function primitively and primordially. It is notoriously hard to know how best, if at all, to argue for what practically amounts to one's axiomatic starting points. If there is a good rational case to be made for moral realism, it likely will involve a constellation of considerations and will require the patience to think the issue through deliberately, carefully, and systematically.

Our basic metaphysical and epistemic convictions help shape what seems rational to us. A commitment to something like ontological parsimony, for example, may ensure never believing in something that does not exist, but it needs to be tempered with the courage, on occasion, to risk belief in order to avoid not believing in something that is real. William James was convinced that whereas avid proponents of parsimony feared superstition, prioritizing simple ontologies, he feared desiccation, too emaciated a worldview owing to an overly ambitious excising of anything remotely mysterious.[45]

At root, error theory is a veto of morality, and the price is prohibitive. It is a denial that torturing children or exterminating whole people groups is wrong, or that racism is perverse, or that integrity is morally better than duplicity and corruption. What it assumes is that our moral experience—the visceral aversion we have thinking about the Holocaust, our phenomenological antipathy to cruelty, our abhorrence of mindless barbarism or rapacious greed, the deep satisfactions of morality we are capable of feeling, our ravenous hunger to see justice done—is systematically misleading. There is nothing in the universe that is moral after all. Nor anything immoral. It is a world stripped bare of any moral features at all. In this sense it is a quintessential picture of the desiccation that James feared.

Such considerations will nevertheless be unconvincing to someone committed never to believe in anything morally authoritative. The appeal can thus be thought of as circular, preaching to the choir, bolstering the views of those already convinced. We do wonder, though, how practicable

such an approach as error theory really is if it is so costly. We also find ourselves wondering if the impracticability of a view provides a certain amount of evidence against it. We suspect it may.[46]

Attentive readers may recognize the Moorean spirit behind several of our considerations so far, but this is hard to avoid. Remember the point that what shapes our view of rationality is what seems most basically true to us. We are inclined to think that the wrongness of child torture is an axiomatic truth that furnishes insight into the nature of reality. (And we wonder who, if they were forced to watch or endure such torture, would not think the same.) But this requires a willingness to listen to the voice of conscience and to heed the lessons of morality in order to give it a place at the table, as it were, in our efforts to figure out the answers to our largest philosophical questions. If instead we are determined to answer all of our metaphysical and epistemic questions first—bracketing considerations of goodness and justice and beauty—then morality will never be seen as even potentially significant evidentially. William James once said that a rule of thinking that precludes coming to see truth that is really there is an irrational rule.

What seems plausible to us is that reason needs to be construed along rather expansive lines. Too constrictive a view of rationality, or too narrow an empiricism, potentially leaves too much out of the picture of reality and the human condition. Morality, to our thinking, appeals to people in a number of respects—intellectually, affectively, relationally, aesthetically, perhaps even spiritually. But an a priori rejection of anything sacred or transcendent or even mysterious will invariably stop our ears from hearing what it has to say.

We admit to being heartened by the fact that robust moral convictions linger not just among most people but also among brilliant philosophers and ethicists who have spent their lifetime thinking hard about such issues. Sophisticated nonnaturalistic ethical analyses have been provided by the likes of Terence Cuneo and Russ Shafer-Landau, David Enoch and Erik Wielenberg. We may disagree with them about the adequacy of something like modern-day Platonism, but in terms of robust moral realism, and resistance to error theory, they are kindred spirits. Nonnaturalistic ethics, in fact, has experienced a major resurgence of interest among leading metaethicists in recent years.

An expansive rationality and empiricism remains open to potential deliverances from moral and aesthetic experiences and from all three elements of Aristotelian rhetoric: logos, ethos, and pathos. In a similar spirit, we think of moral realism as including not just deontic features like binding moral obligations but also value considerations like the intrinsic value of human beings and epistemic considerations like moral knowledge. An unpalatable implication of error theory is that human persons do not, ultimately, have any moral value at all: It is not the case that upholding dignity should be a moral premium or priority; fighting for equal rights is not the right thing to do; battling injustices is no morally better than perpetrating them. Justice is an empty shell of an idea reflecting nothing. This is not an ad hominem attack against error theorists themselves, who are usually eminently fine people, but an honest set of implications about the view itself, rendering it difficult to endorse without swallowing really hard. Again, might that very challenge be a relevant piece of evidence to consider?

This section of the book is not providing a moral argument for God's existence but rather setting the stage for it in part 3. The last set of points we wish to emphasize will deal specifically with theism. In his book *God and Moral Law*, Mark Murphy distinguishes between explanans- and explanandum-driven analyses of God and ethics.[47] Most moral arguments are explanandum-driven approaches that begin with the distinctive features of morality and then argue that God is powerfully or uniquely able to account for them. An explanans-driven approach, which Murphy favors, instead assumes God's existence for purposes of discussion and then shows how such a supernaturalistic reality can account for morality, but he argues that such an approach has no apologetic value. We suspect, though, in agreement with Mike Almeida, that if God can offer explanations not otherwise on offer, such explanans-driven approaches may not be bereft of evidential significance after all.[48]

The point here is close to Robert Nozick's strategy in philosophy, which is less about finding knockdown arguments to persuade others on pain of irrationality or stupidity, and more about finding insights to satisfy various puzzlements.[49] Rather than seeking after compelling proofs, he aims to generate insightful explanations that could help solve problems, dispel confusions, and resolve dilemmas. Nozick prefers possible and plausible

explanations to coercive proofs. He sees his own work in philosophy in this light. Various philosophical matters need to be explained, and he introduces theories to explain them, to render them coherent and better understood.

He is often content with postulating merely possible explanations; indeed, he thinks even impossible explanations can be illuminating and instructive, and here he exhibits some of his penchant for philosophical playfulness. Even false hypotheses can offer some understanding. To get at reality requires true hypotheses, but he did not take this to suggest that hypotheses offered as possible explanations of important phenomena have to be antecedently plausible. Such an insistence would preclude philosophy revealing something new and surprising.

This approach emphasizing possible and perhaps even surprising explanations of important truths contrasts, to Nozick's thinking, with philosophical argument akin to a metaphorical sledgehammer. The latter, he wrote, is not a nice way to behave toward someone. Nor does a desire to produce uniformity of belief best cohere with the sense of puzzlement and curiosity that initially drives people to do philosophy. A successful proof transmits convictions from premises to conclusion, but an explanation may introduce hypotheses not already believed. And its explanatory power may finally lend support to and induce belief, previously absent, in the hypothesis.

In the light of Murphy's and Nozick's points, then, recall the three central queerness concerns that Mackie raised: the ontological strangeness of authoritative moral facts, the question of how such facts supervene on natural facts, and the challenge of accounting for our knowledge of such robust normative truths. We will consider each in turn.

What about the ontological strangeness of authoritative moral facts? As Mackie himself wrote, "Intrinsically prescriptive features, supervening upon natural ones, constitute so odd a cluster of qualities and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen, without an all-powerful god to create them. If, then, there are such intrinsically prescriptive objective values, they make the existence of a god more probable than it would have been without them."[50] Set aside for now the explanandum-driven way Mackie put it; less ambitiously, he is acknowledging that if God were to exist, morality would not be odd after all.[51]

What about moral facts supervening on natural facts? Mackie again: “If we adopted moral objectivism, we should have to regard the relations of supervenience which connect values and obligations with their natural grounds as synthetic; they would then be in principle something that a god might conceivably create; and since they would otherwise be a very odd sort of thing, the admitting of them would be an inductive ground for admitting also a god to create them.”[52] Again, the less ambitious point to stress is that if God exists, we have a ready explanation of the supervenience of moral facts on natural ones. Why is not this just the sort of “indirect evidence” that Mackie earlier seemed to value?

Finally, what about the issue of knowledge of robust moral truths? Mackie once more: “Men cannot by observation and experiment discover exactly what life is ultimately most satisfying for them; but given that God knows this, desires that they should so live, and has somehow revealed corresponding explicit instructions to them, men can reasonably resort to such revelations to infer this indirectly, so as to complete their determination of this required and ultimately satisfying life.”[53] Once more, construed minimally: If God exists, knowledge of robust morality is more readily explained.

These three components were by Mackie’s own admission the heart of the matter, and in each case he saw that theism could potentially resolve the issue at stake. In explaining how, he painted a possible picture of God’s relevance to the foundations of morality that renders the Euthyphro Dilemma impotent.

As Nozick puts it, what seem initially like prima facie implausible explanations to some might surprise us, and we should remain open to what they have to teach us. Rather than insisting on treating nonnaturalism (or theism) as a dead end, perhaps there is wisdom in exploring whether they might have just the resources needed to demystify and bolster moral realism after all.

[1] J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin Books, 1977).

2 Jonas Olson, *Moral Error Theory: History/Critique/Defence* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 21–72.

3 Richard Joyce, "Is Moral Projectivism Empirically Tractable?," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2009): 56.

4 Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 5.

5 R. M. Hare, "Nothing Matters," in *Applications of Moral Philosophy* (University of California Press, 1972), 47, quoted in Mackie, *Ethics*, 21.

6 Mackie, *Ethics*, 22.

7 Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 8.

8 Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 8.

9 Mackie, *Ethics*, 15. He then also extended his case to aesthetic values.

10 Mackie, *Ethics*, 17.

11 At least if this is what Mackie meant, but his use of the phrase "first order" appears to be, if not idiosyncratic, not typical.

12 Mackie, *Ethics*, 36.

13 Mackie, *Ethics*, 37.

14 Mackie, *Ethics*, 37.

15 C. S. Lewis, "Appendix—Illustrations of the *Tao*," in *The Abolition of Man: Or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (HarperOne, 2001), 83–102.

16 At least this is the position he took in his book, but not in his earlier article "A Refutation of Morals," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1946): 77–90. Jonas Olson is skeptical that widespread moral differences are effective at undermining claims of moral realism because, among other reasons, deep and pervasive disagreements figure in nearly all branches of philosophy.

17 Mackie, *Ethics*, 38.

18 G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (1903; repr., Dover, 2004).

19 Mackie, *Ethics*, 40.

20 Mackie, *Ethics*, 41. *X* is said to supervene on *Y* if and only if some difference in *Y* is necessary for any difference in *X* to be possible.

21 Mackie, *Ethics*, 42.

22 Mackie, *Ethics*, 38–39.

23 Mackie, *Ethics*, 41.

24 This is the point at which so-called projectivist theories come into play, psychological and phenomenological explanations for why we tend to think

and speak as if there are moral facts even though there are not.

25 Mackie largely put ethical and aesthetic judgments in the same proverbial boat, thinking the same sort of analysis applies, but here he admits a disanalogy. We have, he argued, less social reasons to objectify aesthetics than we do ethics, which is why, he thought, an error theory of aesthetics is, of the two, the more readily accepted.

26 Mackie, *Ethics*, 43. Mackie also emphasized how we tend to suppress the conditional clause of hypothetical imperatives and start interpreting them as categorical instead.

27 Mackie, *Ethics*, 45–46. See Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (January 1958): 1–19. Anscombe was herself a devout Roman Catholic who would have been pleasantly surprised to see, in the decades subsequent to her essay, a strong resurgence of interest in theistic ethics, including rigorous philosophical efforts to defend it against various objections and to articulate sophisticated versions.

28 Here's just one: the property of being the number 2 and the positive square root of 4.

29 J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God* (Clarendon, 1982).

30 We interpret Mackie charitably here as referring to epistemic possibility, since not even an omnipotent God can rightly be thought to do the metaphysically impossible. Mackie, *Miracle of Theism*, 118.

31 The literature critiquing the efficacy of Hume's arguments against miracles is a growing one. See, for one example, John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

32 C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligations* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 180. See also George Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Cornell University Press, 1986), 223–24.

33 J. L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (Routledge, 1980), 147.

34 Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 102.

35 Mackie, *Ethics*, 40.

36 Interestingly, Olson argues that David Hume himself did not accept this view. See his *Moral Error Theory*, chap. 2.

37 Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory*, 54.
38 Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory*, 141.
39 Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory*, 53.
40 Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 110.
41 Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 114.
42 Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (MIT Press, 2007), 62.
43 Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 117–18.
44 Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, 136.
45 James wrote, "Your bogey is superstition; my bogey is desiccation." William James, in a letter to "an English critic" [probably L. H. Hobhouse] in 1904, reprinted as a footnote to his essay "The Will to Believe," in *William James: Selected Papers on Philosophy*, ed. C. M. Bakewell (E. P. Dutton, 1917), 99.
46 Interestingly enough, Streumer argues that something in its close proximity—error theory's inability to be believed—is evidence for its truth. See Bart Streumer, *Unbelievable Errors: An Error Theory About All Normative Judgements* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 150–52. For a rebuttal of Streumer, see Eric Sampson and Alexander Hyun, "On Believing the Error Theory," *Journal of Philosophy* 111, no. 11 (2014): 631–40.
47 Mark Murphy, *God and Moral Law: On the Theistic Explanation of Morality* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
48 See Mike Almeida, "God and Moral Law: On the Theistic Explanation of Morality," Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, May 6, 2012, https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/god-and-moral-law-on-the-theistic-explanation-of-morality/.
49 Robert Nozick, introduction to *Philosophical Explanations* (Harvard University Press, 1981).
50 J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God* (Clarendon, 1982), 115.
51 A suggestive forthcoming article in *Religious Studies* by Nick Hadsell, "Divine Authority as Divine Parenthood," provides a distinctive fine-grained theistic account of where the authority of morality comes from.
52 Mackie, *Miracle of Theism*, 118.
53 Mackie, *Ethics*, 231.

8

Expressivism

What emerged in the twentieth century was something generally more radical than a simple rejection of complete moral objectivity. What came to be known as *expressivism* called into question whether moral judgments admit of *any* truth values. This chapter will trace some of the history of expressivism—from its precursors to the emotivism of A. J. Ayer (predicated on logical positivism) to R. M. Hare's prescriptivism to various of his critics and detractors.[1] Along the way we will talk about strengths and weaknesses of particular expressivist views. The end of the chapter will lend itself to extending the discussion beyond expressivism as a philosophical theory to expressivism as a wider cultural influence.

The Air Ayer Breathed

Ayer's early expressivism took the form of emotivism, according to which moral sentences are expressions of emotions that say more about those uttering them than they say about the world. Before turning to further explication of this revolutionary view, though, let us identify some of the salient influences that shaped his thought, because Ayer's views were not generated in an intellectual vacuum.

Ayer was much influenced by various empiricists like George Berkeley, John Locke, and, especially, David Hume, his favorite philosopher. Ayer preferred to call his approach "logical empiricism." From Hume, in particular, he absorbed several lessons, among them Hume's rigid division of concepts into one of two categories: "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact."[2] Genuine knowledge is derivable only from the latter. Hume is

famous for having written, “If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.”[3]

There were also more contemporary contributors to Ayer’s perspective. In 1923 literary critics C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards wrote *The Meaning of Meaning*, a book that would wield considerable influence in semiotics, linguistics, literary studies, and philosophy.[4] Distinguishing between garden-variety empirical observations and more primitive, emotive uses of language that are not theoretically verifiable, it anticipated Ayer’s 1936 *Language, Truth, and Logic*. As Benjamin Lipscomb puts it, this hard line between the facts of science and subjective emoting became a tenet of reigning orthodoxy at that time, especially at Oxford.[5] Both books would soon influence *The Control of Language*, a book written in 1939 by Alec King and Martin Ketley that came to be ignominiously known, thanks to C. S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man*, as *The Green Book*.[6]

As a precocious youngster, Ayer at the age of sixteen read Bertrand Russell’s *Sceptical Essays*, which impressed him greatly. When he was attending Oxford University, where Gilbert Ryle was his tutor, Ryle encouraged Ayer to read Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Later in life Ayer would write a book on Wittgenstein, one of about twenty books he would write. Though Ayer admired him, he held misgivings about aspects of both the early and the later Wittgenstein.

Since Wittgenstein resided on the intellectual periphery of the Vienna Circle, reading Wittgenstein led Ayer to travel to Vienna in 1933 to meet with Moritz Schlick, the leader, and other members of the Vienna Circle of logical positivists.[7] Afterward, Ayer’s *Language, Truth, and Logic*, which he wrote in his mid-twenties, practically became a manifesto for logical positivism. It was destined to become a highly influential classic—indeed, perhaps the most read book on ethics of the first half of the twentieth century.

In his autobiography, Ayer mentioned that his *Language, Truth, and Logic* also contained a pinch of pragmatism (especially that of C. I. Lewis) and, interestingly enough, a significant dose of G. E. Moore and his

disciples. At sixteen Ayer had read, in addition to Russell's book, Moore's justly famous *Principia Ethica* and enjoyed it. What made Ayer and Moore an odd couple is that, whereas Ayer would eschew the notion that morality contains cognitive content, Moore was a well-known moral realist and cognitivist. In fact, Moore was something of a moral Platonist (and ideal utilitarian), affirming an intuitive capacity to apprehend objective moral good despite our inability to define it. Mackie, as we saw last chapter, would resist just such a notion. Ayer would come to take moral sentences not merely as false but as bereft of cognitive meaning altogether.

Despite their differences, however, there were significant points of resonance that contributed to Ayer's use of Moore as both springboard and foil for his own work. Ayer appreciated Moore's rigor, analytic machinery, and conceptual analysis. Ayer followed suit by carefully distinguishing actual ethical judgments from (1) definitions of ethical terms (an analytic and conventional matter, which he took to be the business of ethical philosophy), (2) propositions describing the phenomena of moral experience (of psychological or sociological interest but not a philosophical concern), and (3) performative exhortations to moral virtue (which are not propositions at all but more like commands). The reductionist analysis he intended to provide was only of actual ethical judgments.

Ayer also appreciated the empirical elements of Moore's methodology as well as the way that Moore pressed the analytic/synthetic distinction, which plays a central role in Ayer's own analysis. Ayer agreed with Moore that, because of the naturalistic fallacy, it is wrongheaded to try to define goodness in terms of any natural property—whether utilitarian or subjectivist. Ayer's emotivism was not the subjectivist view that morality is a function of one's emotions and tastes, which would render morality a cognitivist matter; rather, he argued that morality involves expressions of emotions, and such expressions are neither true nor false.

So beyond agreeing with Moore in rejecting utilitarianism and subjectivism, Ayer went further, denying the moral knowledge that Moore was convinced we possess. Moore, of course, gravitated to a nonnatural account of moral goodness and, consistent with such a view, thought that knowledge of moral truths is intuitive. It does not come about via inference from nonmoral truths but rather rests on recognizing certain moral propositions as self-evident by means of direct intuition or immediate

insight. Ayer was explicit in denying that any such a priori or rational apprehension of moral truth is possible. The fact that deep moral intuitions can radically conflict made Ayer altogether skeptical that they are a reliable guide. In this sense, Ayer and Moore stood in diametric opposition, and Ayer stood foursquare against anything smacking of a Platonic account of moral truth of the sort Moore espoused. Criterionless moral intuitions, no matter how deep, do not help the Platonic cause.

This leads to one additional contextual aspect of Ayer's positivism and emotivism that bears emphasis. On a Platonic view, the dichotomy between facts and values breaks down; some values *are* (nonnatural) facts. The relegation by one like Ayer of moral discourse to the realm of the merely emotional would have been anathema to Plato, for whom the ultimate good was somehow central both to what is and to what ought to be. This was a shared Hellenistic conviction between Plato and his student Aristotle, despite the differences in their understandings of the human condition and the nature of ethical reality. It would also comport with Hebraic notions according to which values are thought of as prescriptively binding facts.

Ayer and the positivists represented a major break from this tradition, leading to the replacement of a predominantly Aristotelian picture that held sway during the medieval period with a distinctly more modern picture of reality in the early twentieth century at Oxford and elsewhere. This new picture began to take hold and capture imaginations, so much so that it was eventually seen not as a mere picture of reality at all but as reality itself. Lipscomb writes about how Ayer's generation became in thrall to this new "billiard ball" picture of the universe.[8] Rather than a rich Aristotelian picture of the world and human beings as dynamically moving along a trajectory of development from incipient stages to maturity, the new picture was more static, predicated less on biology than physics, featuring inert material bodies acted on by external forces.[9]

Lipscomb offers several reasons why the new picture took hold. Among them were the "suffocating orthodoxy of late-Medieval and early-modern university culture," the discovery of the New World, and Gutenberg's press. In the resulting tumult, a cacophony of new voices emerged vying for allegiance, and so, to avoid the skepticism that such confusions might engender, some began to seek a way to transcend competing impressions and conflicting interpretations, a method for attaining objectivity.

This sketch provides at least a partial explanation for the ascendancy of science with its established track record of figuring things out. The pursuit of objectivity developed momentum, and the next step, Lipscomb argues, involved the effort to eliminate human subjectivity altogether, including all qualitative human experiences, from a description of the world.[10] And this jettisoning of a transcendent good, animating teleology, and human subjectivity in the pursuit of objective truth set the stage for Ayer.

Freddie's Emotivism

After returning from Vienna, Ayer (known as "Freddie" to his friends) set himself to write his first book, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, and it practically became the locus classicus for logical positivism. Even though its precocious and brash author was only in his mid-twenties, the iconoclastic book was destined to arrest the imagination of a generation.

Among its salient features included an assignment of primacy to science, empiricism, and linguistic analysis. A central tenet of the positivism on which Ayer structured his analysis was that cognitively meaningful claims must be either verifiable or a tautology, a verbal ploy of repetition. Again, following Moore and, before him, Hume, the former are called synthetic claims and the latter analytic. By the time of a later edition, Ayer modified the requirement of verification a few times, tweaking or leaving behind accounts of verification (or falsification) by Schlick, Carnap, and Popper and ending up with something like this: To be verifiable is to be an observation statement itself or something that produces some new consequence that is verifiable. An important implication of Ayer's view was the demise of metaphysical claims. Their inability to be verified did not render them merely false, he thought, but meaningless.

Ayer anticipated various objections to his claim that all synthetic propositions are empirical hypotheses, and thus verifiable, and one of the most important came from the realm of value judgments (goodness and beauty in particular). Such judgments, he admitted, are often taken to be synthetic propositions that, contrary to his account of synthetic claims, do not make any particular predictions that can be verified. He argued that

although moral claims are not as altogether vacuous as metaphysical ones, they do not sport the credential of cognitive meaningfulness.

More positively, what Ayer said moral (and aesthetic) propositions *do* communicate is something emotive, an expression of feeling. Though they lack cognitive significance, they possess emotive significance. A moral "claim" is actually not a claim—there is no factually meaningful predicate operative. All we have is an emotive expression, an exclamation, something akin to an outburst. There is moral language, but there are no moral (truth-apt) judgments.

Moral judgments, such as they are, according to Ayer, are expressions of feeling, just as are exclamations, obscenities, cries of pain, and so on. Ayer almost immediately complexified the picture by saying that ethical terms do not serve only to express feeling. They can and often are deployed to serve a wide variety of purposes, like arousing and stimulating feeling and, on occasion, issuing commands. So Ayer's logical analysis of moral language quickly became more complicated than expressing or evincing feelings alone.

In his introduction to the second edition, Ayer acknowledged that he had presented the theory in summary fashion and that it required more detailed analysis. Here he mentioned Charles Stevenson's work as doing just that. In the same context Ayer seemed to hint that emotivism did not need to be tied to his logical positivism; and in fact, Stevenson's approach provided a demonstration that this is so.

With respect to logical positivism, however, a few words are in order. Logical positivism found its precursors in Hume and Mill and, later, in Russell's logical atomism and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. It crystallized and coalesced with the Vienna Circle, and Ayer's work popularized it in England. By Ayer's own admission, his work was not wholly original; it hardly emerged in a vacuum. And just as it emerged, it then waned. Subsequent to Ayer's first edition of *Language, Truth, and Logic*, the confluence of several factors contributed to the decline and, eventually, the demise of logical positivism. Besides the old canard of whether the verifiability criterion passes its own test, other critiques could be mentioned. Emotivism, however, can rest on a different foundation from logical positivism, as Charles Stevenson demonstrated, and we discuss him elsewhere.[11] For now, we turn to R. M. Hare.

R. M. Hare’s Prescriptivism

The other major expressivist we will cover at some length is R. M. Hare. Hare preserved the emotivist distinction between moral judgment and assertion, but he insisted that this distinction leaves room for objectivity of moral judgment. He was keen on allowing disputes about questions of moral value and rational agreement about them. As he saw it, in the spirit of Kant, if moral judgments, like scientific laws, are always about a *type* of situation, then one is disallowed from making such a judgment while making essential reference to oneself.

Hare also emphasized that moral judgment is prescriptive, expressing the will, and he cautioned against mistaking the surface grammar of moral judgments for assertion. What is key, for Hare, about the word “good” is that we use it to commend something for possessing certain characteristics that Hare called the “criteria” of the judgment. The criteria do not entail the value judgments, though, so two people, lacking complete information and impartiality, can look at the same criteria and disagree, and disagree rationally, in their value judgments.[12]

Hare’s analysis can be seen as a corrective effort among expressivists. Consider Ayer’s denial that moral claims possess propositional content and are at most emotive. His effort to explain what is really going on in moral discourse left his view ill-equipped to explain moral disagreement. Stevenson tried to rectify the situation by distinguishing between disagreements about facts and disagreements about attitudes and by highlighting the persuasive element involved in moral language. To render a moral judgment is not just a matter of expressing one’s emotional approval but also of communicating to others that they, too, should approve of it.

Hare took on the challenge of better encapsulating what is really going on when moral language is used and moral ideas debated. The key to moral language, by Hare’s lights, is the Kantian idea of *universal prescriptivity*. Sincere moral judgments imply a command to those in relevantly similar circumstances to act in accordance with those judgments. Rather than focusing on the word “good,” Hare directed his attention to the language of “ought.” Universal prescriptions feature logical implications. His prescriptivism aimed to avoid problems with earlier versions of emotivism, especially in accounting for the possibility of moral reasoning and the

rational pressure to alter our ethical views in response to criticism. “On Hare’s theory, moral discourse is not only meaningful; it has an internal logic. So moral argument makes sense.”[13]

A large part of what inspired Hare’s work was an attempt to capture an element of ethics that became clear to him while he was held in captivity by the Japanese as a prisoner during the Second World War. What he endured was fairly horrific, and much of what sustained him through the ordeal was his sheer will to live and persevere. Will, not coincidentally, would come to function centrally in Hare’s notion of prescriptivity. He had lost his father at the age of ten, and his mother five years later, leaving him an orphan. During the war he came to terms with the fact that his moral principles could not be argued about with his captors but simply affirmed in the face of them by an act of the will. In his *Language of Morals*, this conviction was articulated like this: Each person “must make up his own mind which way he ought to live; for in the end everything rests on a decision of principle.”[14]

Hare was not inclined to emphasize a central role for persuasion in moral discourse. There were no negotiations with his captors. Morality was a more individualistic affair than that for Hare, grounded in a personal decision of principle about how one is going to live in the face of whatever challenging or trying circumstances one might encounter. So though morality has a language and logic of its own, and real and rational disagreement about it is possible, Hare, like Ayer and Stevenson, believed there are no moral facts. The universe is value-free. People simply make their choices, their decisions of principle, and then they reason about the implications of those various commitments and try to live them out. What Hare’s theory offered was moral prescriptivity without moral authority, at least not the sort of objective moral authority or external or extralinguistic referent that some are inclined to think morality requires—and is of most interest to this book.

Earlier various reasons were gestured at for the decline of logical positivism, but perhaps this is an appropriate juncture to make mention of another influence that helped serve to undermine logical positivism, emotivism, and prescriptivism in the minds of many: the war itself.

Lipscomb’s fascinating book deals with how, in the early twentieth century, the work of four women philosophers connected to Oxford—

Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch—challenged the prevailing ethical paradigms of Ayer and Hare that had held sway for decades.[15] And much of the impetus of their opposition to prevailing ethical views was their patent inadequacy in the face of the Second World War and the unspeakable atrocities of Hitler and the Nazis.

More recently Angus Ritchie has written about the Examiner Reports of the Philosophy Finals at Oxford University. A pattern of results on the test chronicles the tension, when it comes to ethics, between the pull of reductionism, on the one hand, and the pull of objectivism, on the other. The knee-jerk response by the students tends to be the former, because tacit scientism can easily make moral facts seem nothing but a matter of preference or cultural convention. However, "sooner or later, whether in the seminar room or the college bar, the case of the Holocaust or the Killing Fields will be raised. Few students are willing to deny the evil of Hitler or Pol Pot is in some sense absolute."[16] The ravages and savagery of war have a way of leading people to rethink their basic moral commitments and to give thought to their foundations.

In the case of one like Philippa Foot, in 1945, after she had returned to Oxford, she was able to view newsreels from the concentration camps. Images from Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen were opening people's eyes to the real extent of the crimes against humanity that had been perpetrated. The footage shocked viewers, Foot among them. Until then she had designs on working in metaphysics, but now she wanted to work in ethics too. The prevailing emotivism at Oxford simply lacked the resources to do justice to the moral crisis the war had produced. Categories like evil, human depravity, or moral authority found no room in those early expressivist views that, more than anything else, had made ethics seem like an antiquated subject. "Nothing in the moral philosophy of her time was adequate to what she'd just seen. And if philosophy was to have any point, it had to be able to speak to that horror."[17]

EXPRESSIVISM AND ITS CULTURAL INFLUENCE

By way of consolidating our findings from this chapter and offering some general remarks about expressivism, let us begin by admitting that emotivism (and expressivism more broadly) provides a way to explain the connection between ethics and action. Our affective responses typically if not invariably figure prominently in our motivations to act. Then again, we can derive this explanatory advantage without giving ourselves wholly over to expressivism and saying morality is *nothing but* our emotions (by "emotions" we refer to feelings, preferences, sentiments, etc.). Emotions can and usually do play a part in our moral matrix without capturing the whole picture. That moral judgments motivate is quite consistent with other approaches to metaethics, including realism.

Moral motivation is one of those data points in need of adequate explanation, but it is not at all clear why it is thought to provide distinctive evidence for expressivism. Moral convictions can motivate us because we are the sort of creatures who tend to care about such things. In fact, efforts have been made to effect a rapprochement or integration between elements of expressivism and realism. In the partial spirit of his father, R. M. Hare, John Hare, articulating his view that he dubs "prescriptive realism," argues that judging something as morally good involves endorsing it, but the endorsement is a response to something external.[18] That moral judgments furnish moral motivation simply underdetermines the answer to the question of whether there is any external referent or factual moral authority.

What seems more decisive than the motivating power of moral judgment as positive evidence for expressivism is the swath of moral data that is left unexplained by the theory taken in isolation. This is why we broached the topic of the war and its unspeakable atrocities, the details of which are enough to turn anyone's stomach. The irony of appealing to something like the Holocaust to assess the adequacy of early expressivism is almost palpable. The Vienna Circle was not in the slightest anti-Semitic; in fact, many of its most prominent members were brilliant Jewish thinkers. Moreover, they were acutely cognizant of the rising anti-Jewish sentiments in Vienna and Germany after the First World War.

A related irony is that witnessing the horrors of war stirs our deepest emotions, and the emotivists accorded great pride of place to emotions when it came to morality. Nevertheless, the scientism of the movement and its rejection of the notions of moral authority and objective moral facts

made it ill equipped to respond to something as morally wretched and ugly as the Holocaust. In truth, the emotivists contributed just as little to the Holocaust as they did to a substantive retrospective discussion of what made it so monstrous.[19]

Empiricists of the early twentieth century tended toward an abstemious interpretation—not just of emotions but of most everything. Among our experiences, they thought, it is the deliverances of the senses alone that deserve priority. Understanding moral, aesthetic, or religious experience as veridical, evidential, or semiotic was generally resisted, if not anathema. Certainly this was true among the logical positivists and among the pragmatists following in the footsteps of John Dewey. Methodological and metaphysical naturalism conditioned the perspectives of such expressivists, from Ayer to Stevenson to Hare, who painted the world as devoid of moral facts and moral authority and robbed moral discourse of its real force.

Additionally, Stevenson's insistence that all moral language serves the purpose of persuasion is susceptible to many counterexamples. His conflation of the effects of our moral utterances with their essential nature seems a blatant mistake, and the epistemological convictions underlying his theory are simply not as well evidenced as certain deliverances of moral experience. Like Dewey before him, Stevenson conceived of ethical discourse in instrumental terms, according to which it is a tool for forging ahead in life after resolving conflicts. Nothing like the attainment of truth is the goal; in fact, such an aspiration tends to be disparaged (by Stevenson and Dewey) as a misguided quest for certainty. But knowledge requires neither objective nor subjective certainty; the former is generally beyond our ken, while the latter is too easy to attain and no guarantee of truth.

If one's moral theory dictates that morality does not shed light on the nature of reality, it also likely lacks the resources to say what we instinctively recognize needs to be said about the most inhumane and treacherous of human behaviors. A conspicuous result of such a theory, such as leaving too much left unsaid (or able to be said) about Hitler or Pol Pot, leaves us little reason to continue adhering to it and plenty of reason to reject it. Dallas Willard refers to the "widespread assumption of most philosophers today that Emotivism has long been refuted about as thoroughly as any theory in philosophy can be refuted."[20] So perhaps it is time to pivot our discussion to a broader treatment of this issue. To rest

content merely with a philosophical assessment of the theory without considering its larger cultural influence would leave too much unsaid.

The early expressivists spent their time talking about moral discourse, all the while insisting on a rather narrow range of its significance, refusing to acknowledge what seem to be the counterintuitive features and somewhat obvious failures of their account of the meaning of moral terms. They saw that moral language carries with it a certain purchase and prestige, of the sort that mere expressions of personal preference do not. But they did not disavow such language use, though they wanted to co-opt it in order to domesticate it. Their efforts to reduce it to something less than it is did anything but show genuine appreciation of its richness and import. Not to put too fine a point on it, this seems an unprincipled failure to take an aspect of reality seriously enough. Truthfulness in language and analysis is considerably more likely to put us in touch with what is actually real and wise and useful.

As important as moral language is, in addition, it is not all there is to consider in our ethical analysis. The linguistic turn among analytic ethicists of the twentieth century was not without its insights, but neither was it without limitations. Invariably other questions come to the fore, clamoring for careful investigation. Questions involving moral knowledge, moral ontology, moral psychology, and the complicated relationship between morality and rationality are among them. Moral language is vitally important, and often a great place to start, but issues of moral experience and moral logic should be given their due consideration as well.

The classical emotivists aimed to provide, in the spirit of the formal mode of philosophy in the early twentieth century, an account of the meaning and nature of basic moral terms and the like. One of the takeaways from this whole discussion, however, is that narrowly analytical critiques of emotivism do little to advance the discourse. It borders on the irresponsible to delimit one’s critique to that relatively superficial level while leaving unaddressed the myriad ways in which emotivism has seeped into the larger cultural narrative. It is important that we recognize ways that emotivism and expressivism have come to assume an outsized role in the public square and are far more than simply niche theories in metaethics. The rather obvious failure of emotivism as a theory of moral language *meaning* does not mean it has not been widely assumed in moral language *use*.

The emotivists recognized that the language of morality retains a certain cachet or prestige. Using moral language carries a punch or purchase that its deflationary emotivist replacements do not; but this leads, for those who buy into this analysis, to something disingenuous at best, dissembling and manipulative at worst. The importance of moral language is one large takeaway from our discussion of emotivism, but talking about moral discourse, even with great analytic rigor, is not necessarily good evidence of taking it with the genuine seriousness it merits. There is something unseemly if, while we do not really believe in the legitimacy of moral categories or terms, we still choose to exploit the fact that others *do* in an effort to alter opinions and effect changes we might like to see.

Think about Kant's insistence that the maxims of our actions need to be universalized. If you lie about repaying a loan in a timely fashion in order to procure a loan, you are implicating yourself in a contradiction of sorts. You want your words to be taken seriously, you want to be believed, and you want the institution of money lending to be there when you need it. But everyone's lying in relevantly similar circumstances, so the argument goes, would invariably sabotage and undermine the whole institution, resulting in its obliteration. So you both want and do not want the institution to be there, implicating you in a practical contradiction of sorts. Whether or not one is convinced by such an argument, the point is clear: In the scenario as depicted, even though you are lying, you are invoking the language of a promise in order to be believed. We want and expect our words to be taken with seriousness, including our moral words.

This point lends itself to the next. Moore and other twentieth-century analytic ethicists seemed to largely neglect spelling out what the social embodiment of any moral philosophy looks like. However, if emotivism were to become widely believed, the significance of our moral language would gradually erode. And in fact, to some degree this process has already begun. Whereas some continue to use the language of morality to convey a sense of gravitas and urgency about what is under discussion, others almost instinctively respond to strong moral claims nowadays with little more than an incredulous stare. Strong moral pronouncements are seen by such skeptics as a refuge of the desperate, a tool of pedants, and a weapon of dogmatists.

This is by no means to say that all such moral language has been left behind, and here historical myopia helps conceal what is going on. Our culture, like any other, has its sacred cows, violation of which invites moral denunciation in no uncertain terms. Since these issues are increasingly thought of as "no-brainers," nothing less than dogmatism is seen as appropriate. Racism, homophobia, and transphobia are good examples.

Alasdair MacIntyre was convinced that, although emotivism has proven a spectacular failure as a theory of meaning, it is fast becoming the predominant use of moral language in the larger culture (in England and America, for example).[21] The idea is that people act, at any rate, as if emotivism is true and that moral discourse is primarily about expressing sentiments, feelings, and preferences. Measuring the accuracy of this analysis raises an empirical question, and the evidence at our disposal seems more than a little ambiguous.

One extensive study of "folk metaethics" revealed that careful examination of folk beliefs about metaethics features a wide array of differing views, including views at odds with one another even in the same individual. So this suggests that there is quite a bit of confusion, if not irrationality, among folk beliefs about metaethics, rendering them of only limited value in adjudicating this whole debate.[22] What seems clear is that expressivist views about morality are among the mix we discover in common use and that the confusion that holds sway among such folk beliefs likely renders them a less-than-optimal place to try to settle metaethical debates, even if they are a fine place to begin.[23] A complexifying factor is the aforementioned vestige of realism, at least among most people, when the likes of Hitler or Pol Pot are mentioned; many continue to think themselves eminently justified to treat moral realism as the default assumption in such cases.

With regard to debates, Ayer wrote that "any attempt to make our use of ethical and aesthetic concepts the basis of a metaphysical theory concerning the existence of a world of values, as distinct from the world of facts, involves a false analysis of these concepts. Our own analysis has shown that the phenomena of moral experience cannot fairly be used to support any rationalist or metaphysical doctrine whatsoever. In particular, they cannot, as Kant hoped, be used to establish the existence of a transcendent god."[24] What might be briefly said about Ayer's claim here?

Whereas logical positivism and classical emotivism fared dismally in the face of World War II, it is perhaps telling how wildly popular were C. S. Lewis's wartime broadcasts in which he articulated a version of the moral argument. It strikes us that an empirically minded individual might find this piece of gritty evidence at the least rather revealing.[25] Beyond that, now that scientism and logical positivism, naturalism and classical emotivism have all been roundly subjected to withering critical scrutiny, and metaphysics, cognitivist morality, and even nonnaturalism have made a comeback, it is a foregone conclusion that Ayer's view about the prospect of moral (or even aesthetic) arguments for theism leaves altogether much to be desired. Ayer himself came to disavow much of his own earlier analysis.

In order for morality to be evidentially significant for theism, though, it needs to be a fairly robust realism. But if there are good reasons to gravitate toward a strong moral teleology and to believe that morality contains objective truths and retains real authority, then the question of what best explains such moral realities will remain a living and important question well worth our time and effort to ponder. (Even if entailment or transcendental relations remain a bridge too far.)

Emotivist construals of ethics continue to exert a large influence in our cultural moment. The primacy assigned to personal feelings in ethical discourse and decision-making is often taken as practically sacrosanct. This tends nowadays less to undermine the cognitive meaningfulness of moral judgments than to accord to personal moral feelings a sort of definitive final say. To the extent, then, that this trend leads to the view that morality is no objective matter, and that perhaps we might aspire to build our own rival ethical systems, it is time we turn to a discussion of the next major metaethical theory on the docket: constructivism.

1 Included among such critics were Philippa Foot and Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch.

2 Sometimes this goes by the name "Hume's Fork."

3 David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), section 12, part 3, paradigm 132.

[4] C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (Martino Fine Books, 2013 [1923]).

[5] Benjamin J. B. Lipscomb, *The Women Are Up to Something: How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch Revolutionized Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 91. Some of the same ground is covered in Clare MacCumhaill and Rachael Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life* (Doubleday, 2022).

[6] Michael Ward discusses the dust-up that Lewis's use of *The Green Book* created. See Michael Ward, *After Humanity: A Guide to C. S. Lewis's "The Abolition of Man"* (Word on Fire, 2021).

[7] Ayer was one of only two English-speaking people to meet and study with the Vienna Circle, W. V. O. Quine being the other.

[8] See chap. 1 in Lipscomb, *Women Are Up to Something*.

[9] Most of the earliest members of the Vienna Circle were physicists.

[10] Lipscomb, *Women Are Up to Something*, 13.

[11] See David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *The Good, the Right, and the Real: Is Value a Fact?* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

[12] Rather than an entailment relation, Hare called the dependence relation one of super-venience.

[13] Lipscomb, *Women Are Up to Something*, 95.

[14] R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Clarendon, 1952), 69.

[15] For another excellent book that covers the same ground, see MacCumhaill and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals*.

[16] Angus Ritchie, *From Morality to Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 1–2.

[17] Lipscomb, *Women Are Up to Something*, 4.

[18] See John Hare, *God's Call: Moral Realism, God's Commands, and Human Autonomy* (Eerdmans, 2001).

[19] For an informative read of the history of the Vienna Circle, see David Edmonds, *The Murder of Professor Schlick: The Rise and the Fall of the Vienna Circle* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

[20] Dallas Willard, *The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge* (Routledge, 2020), 197.

[21] See Alasdair MacIntyre's classic *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), esp. chaps. 2 and 3. Paralleling MacIntyre's shifting the discussion from language meaning to language usage is Trueman's recognition that emotivism can function not just as a (meta)ethical theory but also as a social one. See Carl R. Trueman's perspicacious *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Crossway, 2020).

[22] See Ross Colebrook, "The Irrationality of Folk Metaethics," *Philosophical Psychology* 34, no. 5 (2021): 684–720.

[23] That said, we think that Huemer gives several excellent reasons to think that expressivist analyses are inadequate to account for much moral language use. See Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (Palgrave, 2008), esp. 20–25.

[24] Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 114.

[25] See David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, "A Dinosaur: C. S. Lewis," in *The Moral Argument: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 162–80.

9

Constructivism

A wide variety of things are described as social constructions: from gender and race to property and class boundaries. Behind all such talk is a constructivist account in metaethics that provides an alternative to expressivism, error theory, and realism and has its share of notable adherents—from Gilbert Harman to John Rawls, from Christine Korsgaard to Sharon Street, from Ronald Milo to Roderick Firth, from Michael Smith to Stephen Darwall, from Tim Scanlon to David Copp, and plenty besides.

Asteroids and aardvarks are what we might call mind-independent entities, but what about pet rocks or paperweights? The latter are more plausibly thought of as mind-dependent in terms of their functions served. To be construed as such things is a conventional matter; they need to be thought of in those terms by someone or other. So, although some facts are independent of human minds, not all are, and a plausible question is whether moral facts are best likened to mind-independent entities like squares or salmon, or to mind-dependent objects like hassocks or etiquette.

Moral utterance often seems to presuppose that moral language is at least sometimes assertoric (that is, it asserts things to be a certain way), that on occasion such claims are true, and that morality is objective in one way or another. Nihilists and expressivists have a difficult time accommodating such notions. Speaking roughly, the former (moral error theorists) deny that any moral claims are true because there are no moral properties. The latter (emotivists) deny that moral sentences are assertoric, suggesting instead that they are noncognitive expressions of emotions, preferences, and the like.

Constructivists aim to rectify these deficiencies. Constructivism is a metaethical stance that tries to steer a middle course between realist and expressivist views. It is less an outright *rejection* of moral realism than a substantive *revision*. If moral properties are mind-dependent, according to constructivists, "then we could say that a central function of moral discourse is to represent these properties, that the content of some such discourse is true, and that morality is objective in a fairly robust sense."[1] Moreover, they think they can secure these advantages without susceptibility to the vulnerabilities of moral realism, especially its aforementioned ontologically odd or metaphysically extravagant features.

Let us now consider a typical range of proposals and briefly offer some explanation and critical comments on each of them. Given space constraints, of course, we will need to be deplorably brief. In fact, in light of how implausible individualist subjectivism is, we will skip it for present purposes and move straight to ethical relativism.[2]

Ethical Relativism

The problems with individualist subjectivism might lead some to think the way to avoid such problems is by relativizing morality not to individuals but rather to culture. On this view,

> *X* is moral if and only if (henceforth "iff"), and because, *A* endorses *X*, where *A* is a *group* of agents.

Allan Bloom began his 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind* by writing that there is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: Almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.[3] On the moral variant of this view, which we can call ethical relativism, X *is right* (or *good*) amounts to this: *Society approves of* x. This maneuver neatly avoids making morality a purely individualist affair; moreover, the view is a cognitivist one. Still, problems abound.

For example, most of us are inclined to think that just as an individual can get it wrong, so can a whole society. When the majority or preponderance of Germans, swayed by Goebbels's propaganda, were supportive of the Nazi cause and the wholesale slaughter of Jews and Poles,

surely that did not make such horrible genocide morally legitimate, contra the relativists. Moral relativism retains the category of morality, including language of moral truth; but the truth they affirm, in this case, would be the unspeakable claim that genocide was morally right. So much the worse for ethical relativism!

We made reference to the majority or preponderance of a culture endorsing a practice, and this raises a rather interesting challenge for ethical relativism. Who speaks for a culture or a society? The majority? What if, on a particular vexed question, there are three salient moral camps, none of which hold a majority? In that case, does the biggest voting bloc get final say, in which case a minority voice speaks for the whole culture? What about finer-grained gradations among the winning group? The winning bloc with the decisive say likely does not speak with one voice, so the majority or preponderance among it may have the authority to dictate what the group has to say as a whole. As a decision procedure, this policy is likely to result in increasingly fragmented perspectives, where ever smaller voting blocs could dictate the official moral stance of an entire culture.

Indeed, why, some might query, should the culture be forced to speak as a whole? A society is made up of disparate subcultures, after all, each of which might have its own moral commitments. Why relativize morality to culture per se rather than, say, subculture or sub-subculture? Moreover, since individuals are not part of just one subculture, but many, what would determine what is right for them? Which subculture gets assigned primacy when there is a conflict? And again, since hardly any two individuals even within narrowly defined subcultures share all and only the same moral views, what is to stop the decision procedure from eventually devolving into relativizing morality to the individual all over again?

If we stick to the level of the culture, let us think about a specific example in the history of the United States. There was a time when most Americans were in favor of one of the worst forms of slavery the world has ever seen. If this empirical fact was enough to render slavery morally permissible, if not obligatory, what can be said about those who actively opposed the barbaric institution? The altogether unpalatable implication of the view is that such prophetic voices were actually morally wrong! At least until their influence eventually won the day and the majority of people decided slavery was wrong—at which point slavery actually became

morally wrong for the nation. But this makes the deliverances of morality a simple matter of taking a vote or a poll. Maybe the civil laws of the land are roughly a function of such a policy, but the notion that morality itself operates in such a manner strains credulity.

It would be natural to say that when the nation did eventually "change its mind" on slavery, it underwent moral progress. It went from sanctioning and condoning the treatment of fellow human beings as chattel to denouncing and condemning it. If anything qualifies as a moral move in the right direction, it would be something like that. But ethical relativism has a notoriously hard time making room for the very category of moral progress. After all, according to this approach, the nation was right when, in the main, it condoned the institution; and then it was just as right when it changed its tune and decided to condemn it. Individuals may have been wrong on both sides of the divide (for not echoing the prevailing convictions), but the culture as a whole was never wrong. Surely a reasonable starting data point in our analysis of metaethics, however, is that a culture on occasion can be morally mistaken.

Gilbert Harman is one of the best-known advocates for a theory of ethical relativism. He envisioned morality to be the result of a human agreement, which raises an important question. Ethical relativism may or may not involve an actual agreement in the "social contract" of morality. The problem with a hypothetical agreement is seeing why it would be actually binding, but Harman thinks human social agreements need to be actual. Since such agreements can markedly differ, moral claims are analogous to claims about uniform motion in the context of Einstein's special theory of relativity. Just as claims about uniform motion are relative to spatiotemporal frameworks, so claims about morality are relative to specific contexts shaped by particular social agreements. They are not "absolute."[4] There is no one right moral framework that holds for all.

C. Stephen Evans raises questions about whether Harman's relativism really differs significantly from nihilism or expressivism. Harman admitted his view cannot accommodate universal moral obligations. But the problem is worse: Consider a Mafioso told by his superiors to commit a murder. Harman asserted that it is a misuse of language to say of the assassin that he ought not to kill or that it would be wrong of him to do so. Evans demurs, replying that it is hardly a misuse of ordinary moral language to say that

this employee of Murder, Inc. ought not to kill. To say that morality has authority is in part to say that such claims about what people ought to do can be true regardless of what people believe.[5]

In addition, if the motivation for the agreement is self-interest, as Harman claimed, it is not clear that it is unreasonable for people to fail to keep their moral agreements. Why should not a person agree to live by a set of moral rules and yet selectively disregard those rules when it is in his interest to do so? This is particularly a problem for Harman's view that what creates moral obligations is the individual's decision to accept a particular moral agreement as binding. Decisions are notoriously reversible. One can walk away or can choose to exploit the conformity of others while practicing covert nonconformity oneself. Harman anticipated this objection about "free riders" but without offering a good solution. Harman saw moral obligations as grounded in relative agreements we can always opt out of; such a view does not differ significantly from a denial that any moral obligations exist.

As before, why obey social customs? Either there are good reasons for them or there are not. If there are not, they are merely arbitrary, and though there may be prudential reasons to comply with them, there is no reason to think such arbitrary impositions carry any moral weight. If there are good reasons, it is those reasons rather than the social agreement per se that deserve our allegiance.

Finally, imagine two nations, one peace-loving and pacifistic, the other brutal and aggressive, and that the clear majority in each culture embraces their culture's dominant ethic. Now imagine the violent and predatory country deciding to invade and subjugate the docile and peaceful country. Ethical relativism would declare that anyone in the peaceful country who resisted such domination would be in the wrong, and likewise would be anyone in the violent country opposed to the invasion. In fact, those in the predominantly peaceful country would be obligated to submit to the invasion, and those in the predatory nation would be obligated to comply with the violence their nation incurred. These are among the unpalatable and deeply counterintuitive implications of relativism.

In sum, there seem to be few reasons to take moral relativism seriously, despite its popularity in some circles. Like its individualist cousin, it conflates belief/practice with truth. It also assumes as sacrosanct at least the

fundamental values of any and every culture, vitiates the category of moral progress, and reduces moral disagreement to disagreement over empirical questions about prevailing views. It invests social endorsement with an authority it does not plausibly possess. The alleged social agreements on which it relies are either imaginary or actual, but in either contingency, at least in a case like Harman's, they are nonbinding. In light of the various subcultures of which we are all members, it is unclear which level of society has final say, and because of fine-grained distinctions even between members of the same subcultures, it likely generates a trajectory to reduce morality to an individualist affair all over again. Its problematic implications are numerous, but, again, more sophisticated variants of constructivism remain worth our while to consider.[6]

Rational Subjectivism

A rational subjectivist view like that of Michael Smith suggests that

> *X* is moral iff, and because, *A* would endorse *X* under ideal conditions, where *A* is an individual agent.

Here the context of the endorsement matters; the key is not simply what one happens to desire but rather what one would desire in certain idealized conditions of reflection. This move from the actual to the ideal is a recurring strategy among constructivists aiming to capture a stronger sense of objectivity, which comes in various gradations.

The fact that constructivism is a cognitivist theory provides all the objectivity some may say they want, but recall that even error theory can accommodate such minimal objectivity. Error theorists agree that moral judgments have a truth value; it just so happens it is always false. Most constructivists insist on more objectivity than that, such as the possibility of being at least sometimes right in our moral judgments. On our view, such a nonnihilist condition is necessary for objectivity but still not sufficient. What more is needed? Well, on the other end of the spectrum from minimal objectivity is strong or robust objectivity that requires something like stance-independence (or mind-independence). Recall that this is the sort of objectivity associated with moral realism that we hope to defend. Clearly

enough, rational subjectivism, like the other constructivist theories, is unable to achieve that kind of objectivity.

Despite that Smith calls his view a version of moral realism, this does not seem right. For reasons that will become clear soon enough, rational subjectivism does not qualify as a realist theory. But why think it is the wrong account? It is an appreciable improvement, after all, on those theories that do not make appeal to idealized conditions. Smith aspires to bring together objective moral facts and the intrinsic ability of morality to confer reasons and/or motivations to act in compliance with it, by moving the discussion from actual reasons to reasons generated in an idealized context—one in which a moral agent is well informed, calm, cool, and collected.

The main reason such a view is not a realist view of ethics is that there is nothing that moral agents *discover* about the content of morality. There is nothing antecedent to one's desire to grasp. One's idealized desires constitute what is right and wrong, as Moreland and Horner put it.[7] Confirming the nonrealist nature of the account is Smith's admission that since reasons are person-relative, rational subjectivism almost invariably leads to relativism, with all its attendant problems. Smith holds out the hope that this contingency will eventually cease manifesting once people "converge" in their moral judgments. It has not happened yet, but Smith holds out the hope it will. But on what basis? Converge on what? There is no objective morality to discover and thus converge on, according to this view, so hopes it will happen seem little more than Pollyannaish, unmoored wishful thinking.

Smith also seems to think, as Plato did, that eliminating ignorance will ensure good moral choices, but history is replete with examples of people with no shortage of education or ability to reason but whose moral choices are arguably abominable. To choose a stark example, consider Theodore Kaczynski, the Unabomber, notorious for his acts of domestic terrorism. He was also a math prodigy and brilliant mathematics professor. Reflecting on his life, Kaczynski's sister-in-law, a philosopher named Linda Patrik, wrote this about what she learned from the whole sordid affair: "Based on this whole experience, I have lost respect for tremendous intellect. I have discovered that genius needs to be coupled with heart and loving

relationships with people to have a positive impact on society. I now know that intellectual brilliance alone has great dangers."[8]

Some might balk at this particular example because, they assume, he had severe mental issues. This is likely true, but this is consistent with our point. G. K. Chesterton once wrote that a madman is not someone who has lost his reason but someone who has lost everything but his reason. Moral propriety is not ensured by intelligence or education. Our desires can be warped, twisted, perverse; as Augustine said, they can be either ordinate or inordinate. Smith seems to be operating under the misguided notion that one's desires are in proper working order, which is a large assumption.

Smith is also operating with an instrumental, self-interested understanding of rationality. That strategic choice immediately delimits the sort of conclusions one is able to draw. Morality is left bereft of the otherwise rich resources at its disposal when a more expansive conception of rationality is allowed to operate. For the most part, this attenuation of rationality represents a significant departure from ancient and medieval construals of reason that allowed for the possibility of its apprehension and appreciation of normative features of reality. It is, at the least, not at all obvious that this emaciated modernist conception of rationality should be assumed as authoritative. Interestingly, Patrik went on to add another lesson she had learned from her brother-in-law's tragedy: "Sometimes ethical decisions need to be made that have nothing to do with self-interest or self-benefit."[9]

Ideal Observer Theory

Another variant of constructivism that emerged in the twentieth century pushes yet harder for more objectivity: the ideal observer theory (IOT). According to IOT, morality is dictated by the hypothetical deliverances of someone perfectly well qualified and situated to make such judgments. Such an ideal observer would see clearly, reason impeccably, and not be at all afflicted with blind spots, distorting biases, or anything else that would cause epistemic deficiency, disadvantage, or dysfunction. Rather than an actual contract between the members of a society, IOT features a hypothetical and ideal one. By appeal to the verdicts of an ideal observer,

someone eminently if not perfectly qualified to make authoritative ethical pronouncements about a situation, advocates argue that this feature of their approach lends itself to obligations with great prescriptive force that are perhaps even universal in scope. On IOT,

> *X* is moral iff, and because, *A* would endorse *X*, where *A* is an ideal hypothetical agent.

The locus classicus of such a view is Roderick Firth's piece on the subject titled "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer."[10] Recall that rational subjectivism would have us imagine, say, an idealized you or me, including potentially unhealthy desires, but IOT further idealizes the agent in question. What would a hypothetical, ideally rational agent endorse? This further step toward abstraction can be thought to serve as a corrective to the problems with rational subjectivism. Ethical judgments are interpreted by IOT as statements about the reactions of a fully informed and neutral agent.

What are the traits that this ideal observer possesses? According to Firth, the ideal observer is a normal person save for these characteristics: omniscient regarding relevant nonmoral facts, omnipercipient, dispassionate, disinterested, and consistent. Important to note is what is absent from the list: any moral attributes. This is necessary because, on Firth's view, there are no moral facts save for those that come into existence as a result of endorsement by the ideal observer, and moral traits would require instantiation of prior moral facts, contra IOT. Complete moral knowledge is not an intrinsic feature of the ideal observer but rather an emergent property from the combination of the ideal observer's other traits and its knowledge of pertinent nonmoral facts.

A variety of concerns can be raised about the adequacy of IOT as a metaethical theory. Among them Moreland and Horner raise four issues: First, again, an operative assumption is that the sole source of moral problems is an agent's lack of nonmoral information or his being sidetracked by contrary emotions from proper self-interested reasoning. Second, it is difficult to imagine what a hypothetical nonmoral agent would endorse when his reasoning is utterly abstracted away from all normative conceptions. Anything like benevolence is a moral quality, but moral qualities are ruled out for the ideal observer. Third, there is no reason to think that on this picture the ideal observer would arrive at anything like

fundamental concerns for justice and caring for others. And fourth, since we are dealing with a purely hypothetical agent, why think that the agent's deliverances, such as they are, would have any authority over one's actual values and behaviors?[11]

The objection we will point to comes from a different analyst—namely, Alan Donagan. In his *Theory of Morality*, he explores the prospect of IOT providing what he called the stock of common moral convictions. Donagan was particularly influenced by the fiction of George Orwell and the need to safeguard human value. Ambiguities and limitations in IOT, he thought, pose a problem for achieving such an end. He constructed an analogy: Imagine if our explanation for a certain sum of two numbers was that this is the result generated by the ideal calculator without any explanation provided of how the calculator managed the challenge of addition.

We would be dissatisfied by such an answer, as we should be when someone points to the deliverances of the ideal observer with precious few specific details for how the ideal observer generates moral answers. Donagan anticipated that one might wish to say that the operation of the moral sense does not lend itself to providing those details. Since Donagan traced an important strand of the history of IOT to Adam Smith, it would make sense that an appeal to something like a moral sense would be made since this was a salient feature of several Scottish Enlightenment figures (especially Hutcheson). As for Donagan, though, as with most today, he was quite skeptical of any such sense.

Donagan thought that if such skepticism is warranted, this meant the deliverances of the ideal observer should lend themselves to a rational explanation instead. If so, he thought, some description of those rational processes should be forthcoming. This is especially pressing when adjudicating conflicting moral claims from equally consistent moral theories. How would an ideal observer, for example, decide between sacrificing one for the sake of many or upholding the rights of the one not to be thus sacrificed? Donagan was profoundly skeptical that IOT had a good solution.

The objection he considered fatal for IOT was that either there are no principles that one must accept by following the procedure prescribed or there is no way of assuring oneself that one has succeeded in following it.[12] This is no merely academic matter. Tom Carson observed many years ago

about ideal observer theories, “For any view or attitude, however absurd or objectionable, one can easily conceive of a possible creature who knows all of the relevant facts, etc., and who holds the view or attitude in question.”[13]

Contractarian Constructivism

Suppose we leave behind the individual variants of hypothetical constructivism and opt for a group version instead. This leads us toward what has been called contractarian constructivism (CC), according to which

> *X* is moral iff, and because, it is permitted by rules that free, equal, and rational people would agree to live by, as the condition that others obey these rules as well.

For a paradigmatic contractarian constructivist, consider Ronald Milo, who also attempts to steer a middle course between expressivists and robust moral realists. He agrees with expressivists that there are no stance-independent moral truths, and he thinks that robust realists mistakenly treat moral truths too much like those truths found in science. He thinks that the point of ethics should be kept front and center in order to regulate and direct human behavior. As such he attempts to provide an account of moral truths and facts that is neither expressivist nor robustly realist. As he puts it, “*Contractarian constructivism*, as I shall call it, holds that moral truths are most plausibly construed as truths about an ideal social order, rather than the natural (or some curious nonnatural) order of things. It is true (or is a fact) that a certain kind of act is wrong, for example, just in case a social order prohibiting such acts would be chosen by rational contractors under suitably idealized conditions.”[14]

On this view, the ideal social order described by moral truths is constructed; it is not an independent moral order. Moreover, Milo insists that the moral principles chosen by the hypothetical contractors are taken by those contractors as *action guides* rather than *truth claims*. Moral principles are true just in case the action guide in question is the object of a certain kind of rational social choice. This is to see moral truths as practical truths rather than theoretical truths. We are justified in accepting the latter, Milo writes, because of the explanatory necessity of positing them. Practical truths, in contrast, are truths about what there is reason, for some individual

or group of individuals, to prefer, choose, or do from some point of view. Among such points of view is the moral point of view.

Practical truths are discovered through practical reasoning. Whereas theoretical reasoning aims at determining what to believe, practical reasoning aims at determining what to choose. Rather than inferences to the best explanation, like those we often find in theoretical reasoning, the modus operandi of practical reasoning tends to be something more like an "inference to the best means"—that is, an attempt to figure out how best to achieve reflective equilibrium among our beliefs and our desires.

Rather than endorsing a normative theory of constructivism, which would leave underdetermined the nature of moral facts, Milo defends a metaethical variant of constructivism. This leaves unfinished the task of delineating the subject matter of moral judgments. He is attempting to say something about the ontological status of moral facts like moral wrongness. Such facts are, he thinks, evidence-independent; in this way, his view resembles moral realism. This is to say, in both cases, there may well be moral truths for which there is currently a lack of evidence. But unlike robust moral realism, his constructivism concedes to the antirealists that moral facts are stance-dependent, reliant on human volition in ideal conditions.

CC is an attempt to achieve a greater level of objectivity than the aforementioned forms of constructivism. The objectivity achieved is not of the sort that puts us in touch with a transcendent realm of reality; rather, it derives from the fact that moral facts describe an objectively preferable social order. In sum, Milo thinks that he has shown that his view provides a plausible account of what moral thought and talk is really about that captures the essentially action-guiding function of moral principles without depriving them of their aspirations to substantive truth or the dignity of a cognitive status.[15]

This view remains afflicted with several of the aforementioned deficiencies. Even though its orientation is more social than individual, the view still seems predicated on according primacy to self-interested considerations that are far from morally neutral and make it challenging to account for the other-directed concerns of morality.

In this connection, although CC might help explain certain constraints on morality, morality is much richer than that. For example, even if we

suppose that CC carves out room for rights and duties in some form, there is ever so much more to morality beyond those deontic concerns. Consider, for example, the value of human persons. Arguably the recognition of such a thing, though it clearly has implications for our behavior, goes beyond that one consideration alone. Human value is most usually thought to be not conferred but recognized. Additionally, unless there is deep conviction about such a matter, its prescriptive grip on our behavior and imagination, as history has tragically shown time and again, is notoriously tenuous. The problem becomes especially acute in cases where some simply choose not to adopt the "moral stance." As an example, rhetoricians speak of *reification* among demagogues, the treating of persons as things in order to demonize and silence them, for which there is no shortage of historical examples.[16]

Relatedly, as Moreland and Horner argue, CC does not even explain moral constraints very well because of the existence of free riders. If one were to think one could get away with being a free rider—exploiting the fact that most others will not do so—what compelling reason, moral or rational, is there against doing so? And at any rate, why consider as binding the deliverances of hypothetical agents—especially in light of CC's watered-down account of what counts as moral truth?

Humean and Kantian Constructivism

Sharon Street's important constructivist proposal, in the spirit of Hume, aims to provide a ground for all normative facts, not merely moral ones. According to her view,

> *X* is a reason for a person to do *Y* iff, and because, the judgment that *X* is a reason for the person to *Y* withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of the person's other judgments about reasons.[17]

According to Street, whenever we make a normative judgment, there are standards involved by which our reasoning can be judged (whether we consciously recognize it or not). She writes, "Simply by judging yourself to have reason to Y, you're *thereby*—as a constitutive matter—also judging yourself to have reason to take the means to Y, whatever those may be. So even if you don't know that Z is a means to Y, and think you have no reason

whatsoever to Z, you *do* have a reason to Z—*according to you*. Your very own normative judgment says so; *it* sets the standard according to which you are making a mistake if you think you have no reason to Z."[18]

For a normative judgment to withstand scrutiny is "for that judgment not to be mistaken as determined by the standards of correctness that are constitutively set by those other normative judgments in combination with the non-normative facts."[19]

As Christian Miller sums up Street's view, "What normative judgments we happen to have now are not likely going to all withstand scrutiny in Street's sense. Rather, it is only the hypothetical set of a person's normative judgments which have been appropriately filtered and purged, that Street thinks is the basis for the normative facts which pertain to that person."[20]

Unlike the Kantian constructivists, Street rejects the idea that the result of the filtering process will be one or more values that everyone must have. As she writes, "If you had entered the world taking entirely different things to be reasons, on my view, you would have *had* entirely different reasons. You might even have had reason to throw yourself under an oncoming boulder, or to die for the sake of eating a particular bowl of chili, or indeed to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of your finger."[21]

At this point, Miller argues that what he calls the *constructivist dilemma* can be brought to bear against Street's view. Patterned after the famous Euthyphro Dilemma, the constructivist dilemma poses a problem for both restricted and unrestricted versions of constructivism. The unrestricted versions fall prey to what corresponds with the objection to the voluntarist horn of the Euthyphro Dilemma. Miller calls it the "Anything Goes Concern": In principle at least, any action, no matter how heinous, could become morally positive if the respondents were to respond positively to its being performed.

Miller writes that we end up getting a conditional like this: "If [respondents] were to have [some positive response] to someone at some time bringing about the torture to death of an innocent child, then it would be [some positive normative evaluation] for someone at that time to bring about the torture to death of an innocent child."[22] Obviously, this implication is clearly morally disturbing, and no plausible theory should allow it.

As an unrestricted approach, Street's view is vulnerable to just this concern. Indeed, as Miller notes, Street herself provides us with the possibility on her view of there being a fully consistent Caligula, bent on the destruction of other people. As she writes, "If Caligula is aware of all the non-normative facts and has recognized every normative conclusion that follows from his own values in combination with those facts, then there is nothing he is failing to see."[23] This implication is clearly disturbing, Miller argues, and no respectable theory should countenance it.

Whereas Hume assigned primacy to intersubjective human sentiments, Kant wished to move the discussion to the dictates of rationality. As a result, Kantian constructivism, contra Humean constructivism, insists that there are at least some moral values that everyone must have. Such values are thought to be the result of rational deliverances. Christine Korsgaard is a notable contemporary example of a Kantian constructivist, and on her view,

> *X* is moral iff, and because, *X* is rationally willed by ideally rational agents constrained by necessary structures of practical reason.[24]

On this construal of Kant, moral reasoning has a built-in structure with formal rational constraints. Moral facts thus do not find their locus outside the psychological and volitional activity of agents. Nevertheless, they are not, as on the Humean picture, desire-based reasons for action grounded in self-interested rationality but rather grounded formally in the structure of practical reason itself. They are, as a result, not contingent but necessary "to all reasoning about what to do. They apply categorically and universally to all rational agents, regardless of the agent's contingent desires and aims."[25]

Moreland and Horner, however, offer this critique of Kantian constructivism: "Though it overcomes many of the weaknesses of other constructivist views, it fails to capture their strengths in terms of connecting morality to persons and personal motivation. On the standard interpretation, Kant's understanding of morality is austere and impersonal, abstracted away from contingent human concerns and desires. Morality amounts to formal rational consistency—a far cry from seeing it as embedded within the context of persons and personal relationships."[26]

An arguably even stronger objection is that constructivism gets the explanatory order inverted. The deliberations of ideally rational agents will

disclose to us what is moral just in case objective moral values exist explanatorily prior to their deliberations. Their deliberations cannot be explanatory prior to the existence of objective moral values because, in that case, ideally rational agents might all agree with Mackie and be moral antirealists!

Perhaps even more importantly, for present purposes, is that Kant was one of the great luminaries in the history of the moral argument for God. A merely constructivist construal of Kant's views along the lines of Korsgaard would fail to account for how this could be so. Owing to the likes of Karl Ameriks, John Hare, Stephen Palmquist, and others, a recent sea change has taken place in Kantian studies that has assigned greater pride of place to theism in his construal of morality. One piece of the resultant picture is the way Kant argued that moral duties should be understood as the commands of God.

Because of the centrality of Kant to the historical development of the moral argument, and because theistic ethics on occasion is interpreted along constructivist lines, we need to spend a bit of time on this question of God and ethics before we close this chapter.

Theistic Ethics

Constructivism is a fascinating effort in metaethics to salvage mind-dependent ethical truths that are nevertheless sufficiently objective. If the effort succeeds, it shows a middle course can be steered between expressivism and moral realism. The array of constructivist proposals is impressively wide, and we have been able to briefly consider only a handful of examples here.

This makes us hesitant to dismiss all constructivist proposals as problematic or inadequate, but we have come to see that a number of recurring problems do tend to beset and plague constructivism. If there is a theoretical framework of metaethics at least in the vicinity of constructivism that holds potential to withstand critical scrutiny, some might wish to argue that it is the effort to make morality, or at least aspects of it, dependent not on human minds but rather on a divine mind. This maneuver introduces the topic of theistic ethics.

The sort of realism that we have been most interested in locating, if we are able, is moral realism of a robustly objective sort. Most constructivist proposals, as we have seen, do not provide what we are looking for, because they remain problematically mind-dependent. The moral truths construed along such lines may be objective in a weak sense but are not objective in the stronger sense of being mind-independent.

Now, what about morality that finds its foundation in a supernatural being like God? For purposes of discussion, suppose by "God" here we are referring to God as traditionally conceived, a maximally great being. So God is, thus construed, all-powerful, all-good, all-knowing, and the like. What might it mean for God to provide the foundation of morality? Let us put it generally and suggest that it means that the various aspects of morality essentially depend on God—perhaps God's nature, desires, will, or commands. At this point we are trying to keep the definition rather general because there is a variety of ways in which morality has been argued to depend on God: natural law theory, divine command theory, divine desire theory, divine will theory, exemplarism, and more besides. The differences between such theories are not unimportant, but what we want to consider for now is the general idea that morality, in one way or another, importantly depends on God, derives its authority from God, or something in that neighborhood.

To say that morality depends on God might be thought to be another variant of constructivist ethics. To illustrate why, consider the paradigmatic example of divine command theory (DCT), which is usually offered as an account of moral duties, as follows:

> *X* is morally right (dutiful) iff, and because, *X* is commanded by God.

This analysis suggests that moral duties result from God's commands, but of course this leaves other moral concepts and phenomena—like moral goodness, moral rights, and so on—unexplained. If someone were to offer an unlimited divine command theory in order to cover the full range of moral realities, that would be a fully or radically voluntarist theistic account of morality. But such a view tends to be rare in the scholarly literature on the subject. It is much more common to see DCT, when it is referred to at all, as delimited to moral duties—following the advice from William Alston

several decades back.[27] This is what we can call a weakly voluntarist account, and it is the theory we wish to consider for a moment.

Why some argue that this is a constructivist account should be fairly obvious. If something is morally obligatory because it is ultimately grounded in God's commands, then there is a divine mind-dependence at work here. At least an aspect of morality would be a function of an aspect of the divine mind. As such, Michael Huemer argues that theistic ethics, thus construed, is an instance of constructivism and, as a result, subject to most if not all of the various criticisms that have been lodged against constructivism.[28]

In particular, an objection to divine command theory that is quite common derives from *Euthyphro*. Recall Miller's use of a generalized Euthyphro-styled objection to certain variants of constructivism. The Euthyphro Dilemma, put in contemporary terms, goes something like this: Is something morally right (dutiful) because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right? Both horns of the Dilemma seem problematic, as we saw in part 1.

The former horn would affirm a limited account of morality: a divine command theory of obligations. But this seems problematic for various reasons, including an arbitrariness concern. Imagine if God were to command us to torture children for fun. Then we would be morally obligated to do that, which is obviously a problem for the theory. The latter horn of the Dilemma affirms that God issues commands, but what he tells us to do is what is already antecedently right. So this renders God at most as the source of some moral knowledge but not the ultimate foundation of morality. So moral rightness is either arbitrary or beyond the scope of God's authority; so much the worse for DCT.

With that cursory foundation in place, consider now the constructivist proposal advanced by Stephen Darwall, which illustrates how the Euthyphro Dilemma can be used to criticize constructivism more generally and what might be said by way of reply. Darwall has argued for a "juridical account" of moral duties inspired by themes in Fichte and Kant but also developed in conversation with early modern "theological voluntarists" like Pufendorf and Locke.[29] Darwall argues that moral obligations are grounded in the demands of persons. Moral obligations are linked to being accountable for such demands, but God is not needed. Rather, all that is

required is a moral community of equal, autonomous human agents who hold each other accountable.

For Darwall, a moral obligation is not simply an act one has a moral reason to do. Rather, moral obligations derive from claims or demands that persons make on one another. Moral obligations are moral demands, and moral demands are whatever we are legitimately held to or answerable for—that is, where violations are blameworthy if the agent lacks a valid excuse. If someone steps on your toe and you request the offending party to stop doing so, refusal would be wrong in a new way because ignoring your justified request shows you a lack of respect.

Darwall, however, does not think that all duties derive from claims made by actual persons. Some behaviors are wrong simpliciter, and these are linked to a demand that one would be blameworthy for not recognizing even if the demand is not made by anyone. So he thinks that there are many moral obligations not grounded in actual demands made by anyone.
C. Stephen Evans argues that this poses a problem for Darwall, whose sympathies seem to be with a "procedural" constructivist view. Evans writes, "While Darwall draws on both Kantian and contractualist forms of constructivism, he seems to be offering yet another form by proposing that moral obligations are grounded in the claims human persons make on each other."[30] This introduces a tension in Darwall's view.

Since not every claim is a legitimate moral claim—the demands of a bully, for example—justified or warranted claims are normative in character, and these normative facts must hold antecedently to any claims any actual person makes. This is no criticism of Darwall, just a feature of his view; and it parallels what we find in the divine command theory like that of Robert Adams. Moral obligations can be thought to presuppose use of other normative concepts; it would seem that both Darwall and Adams do this. In fact, Darwall sees a parallel between his own view and DCT, but he replaces God with the human moral community.

DCT is confronted with a "prior obligations" objection: Why obey God's commands? Simply to say it is because God commands it seems objectionably circular. Similarly, Darwall's view holds that some obligations do not arise from the demands of actual persons; there is a prior obligation to respect the legitimate demands of other people even when no demands have been made. The problem Evans raises is this: If Darwall is

understood as a constructivist, are the “prior obligations” that hold antecedently to any actual claims made by actual persons something that the constructivist can explain? Can “the moral community,” understood as a “regulative ideal,” do the job? If not, then there might seem to be moral obligations that are not second-personal in nature after all.[31]

A divine command theorist like Robert Adams could make appeal to normative truths rooted in God but not rooted in God’s commands, and this is exactly what he did, predicating his DCT on a theistic Platonic account of the good. The challenge for Darwall is arguably worse because the prior normative truths he appeals to are not rooted in any actual commands. Darwall can, and does, attempt to appeal to hypothetical demands, but this approach faces its own Euthyphro problem. Does the claim in question make the demand moral, or is the claim based on what is already morally right? The former leads to arbitrariness, whereas the latter departs from Darwall’s paradigm.

As we have seen, it is also unclear how moral obligations are constructed from nonactual persons or communities. Evans adds, “Just as it is sometimes claimed that Kant’s categorical imperative is too abstract and formal to give rise to determinate moral principles, it may be that the idea of the ‘moral community’ is too abstract and formal to give rise to determinate moral obligations.”[32]

Antecedent moral principles sound suspiciously more like moral realism than constructivism. Likewise, the moral autonomy to which Darwall appeals as partially constitutive of intrinsic human value also sounds like an appeal to moral realism. So, despite resonances between Darwall’s view and constructivism, it seems as if something much like moral realism is needed to salvage his view in the face of Euthyphro-like objections. The hypothetical demands Darwall appeals to sound much like the timeless moral truths of the sort that nonnatural realists accept.

Moreover, at just this juncture, DCT holds an advantage over Darwall’s view. God is taken, on DCT, to be an actual being, whose commands are not just hypothetical. Recall a problem with IOT: Why care about the judgments of a nonexistent being? “However, if God actually exists,” Evans writes, “God’s judgments might matter greatly. For example, it may be argued that humans owe a great debt of gratitude to God as the creator of

every good we have, or it might be argued that our ultimate happiness is linked to a loving relationship with God."[33]

It is not part of our agenda at this point to argue for DCT or theistic ethics more generally, although we are keen on leaving such options on the table for consideration. We tend to find many dismissals of them too hasty, especially those posed by the Euthyphro Dilemma against radical voluntarism. As Evans just argued, too, it is not at all clear why DCT might not be used to avoid pitfalls encountered by Darwall's inventive account.

We have admitted that it is difficult to dismiss constructivism entirely and that some variant of it might pass muster. To our thinking, the best prospect for doing so is something like a robust theistic ethic, which makes aspects of morality stance-dependent but dependent on God's mind rather than that of human beings. And it does so potentially in a way that retains cognitivism, nonnihilism, robust objectivity, and even moral necessity, while still retaining a personalist component to the ethical enterprise. Often these priorities seem at odds, essentially irreconcilable. But if such a project is doable, a sort of synthesis of key elements of moral realism and constructivism may well be possible and preferable.

This brings to mind some words from Thomas V. Morris, who presciently anticipated just such a development, arguing that key elements of Platonism and theism can be reconciled, yielding "a view which both retains the commitments of realism concerning the objective existence and status of abstract entities and modal truths, while at the same time capturing the conviction of anti-realists and conventionalists that such items must be in some sense mind-dependent. And this in itself is quite significant."[34]

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This chapter has been a circuitous journey. We consider constructivist theories to be nothing less than fascinating, and many variants of it are clever indeed and well worth careful consideration. We even suspect that certain key elements of constructivism and realism can achieve something of an integration, helping to account for both the strongly objectivist flavor of morality and its deeply personalist aspects as well. We traversed quite a

bit of terrain: We discussed, in turn, ethical relativism, rational subjectivism, ideal observer theory, contractarian constructivism, Humean and Kantian constructivism, and theistic ethics.

Constructivism, in general, seems to fall prey to several recurring deficiencies. Often it fails to capture the requisite level of objectivity that moral language, logic, and phenomenology require. Where it refers to actual persons and their preferences, agreements, and the like, there often seems to be the option of backing out from such contracts. Movement toward more idealized situations and hypothetical contracts leaves us wondering where the authority of such nonactual entities comes from and why their deliberations should constitute rather than merely disclose to us the moral good. The problem of free riders is chronic.

With the possible exception of DCT, constructivism has a difficult time making good enough sense of binding moral duties. Moreover, what is ultimately required in a robust metaethical account is more than merely an account of moral duties. A whole panoply of other moral phenomena—from moral values to basic human rights, the demands of justice to moral knowledge, and more besides—cry out for more adequate explanation than what constructivism can seem to explain.

Since we are on the lookout for a defensible variant of moral realism serviceable in a moral argument for God's existence, constructivist aspects of theistic ethics are not problematic. Moreover, if a theistic ethic can be successfully argued, as it has been by the likes of Robert Adams, C. Stephen Evans, John Hare, and others, to be reconcilable with due regard and adequate principled space for human teleology, binding normativity, necessary moral truth, and robust objectivity, then there is all the more reason to think that moral realism may well evidentially point to God's reality. It is imperative, however, not just to dismiss theistic ethics based on its worst and weakest examples, like radical voluntarism, but rather to give serious considerations to its best formulations.

We do not make that full case at this point. Instead, we are simply setting the table for such a discussion, arguing that theistic ethics deserves a place in the discussion once it is seen there are good reasons to take moral realism seriously. To make the full case would require articulating a defense of theistic ethics, including Euthyphro objections, and criticizing nontheistic efforts to account for moral realism. For now, we end our discussion of

constructivism, concluding, at least tentatively, that when divorced entirely from moral realism it appears to encounter insuperably steep challenges.

[1] Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo, introduction to "Constructivism," in *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo (Blackwell, 2007), 79.

[2] For a treatment of individualist subjectivism, see David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *The Good, the Right, and the Real: Is Value a Fact?* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

[3] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 1987).

[4] "Moral right and wrong (good and bad, justice and injustice, virtue and vice, etc.) are always relative to a choice of moral framework. . . . And no moral framework is objectively privileged as the one true morality." Gilbert Harman, "Is There a Single True Morality?," in *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 78. See also Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1977).

[5] C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 132.

[6] For a popular and practical treatment of ethical relativism, see Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in the Mid-Air* (Baker, 1998).

[7] J. P. Moreland and David Horner, *Metaethics: A Short Companion* (B&H Academic, 2024), 76. This delightful book is a terrific primer on metaethics.

[8] "A 1998 *Union College* Magazine Interview with Professor Linda Patrik," Union College, May 14, 2008, https://muse.union.edu/newsarchives/category/stories/page/202/.

[9] "Interview with Professor Linda Patrik."

[10] *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12 (1952): 317–45.

[11] Moreland and Horner, *Metaethics*, 78–82.

12 Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (University of Chicago Press, 1977), 220–21. See, too, Richard Brandt, "The Definition of an 'Ideal Observer' Theory in Ethics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 15, no. 3 (March 1955): 407–13. Brandt was a staunch defender of IOT.

13 Thomas L. Carson, *The Status of Morality* (D. Reidel, 1984), 76. A problem with IOT is that it concerns moral epistemology rather than ontology. The ideal observer can guide us to the content of the moral good, but no reason has been given to think that the verdict of the ideal observer constitutes the moral good. Only if the moral good exists objectively would the deliberations of the ideal observer be any help in discerning what is good.

14 Ronald Milo, "Contractarian Constructivism," in *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo (Blackwell, 2007), 121.

15 Milo, "Contractarian Constructivism," 131.

16 Jennifer Mercieca, *Demagogue for President* (Texas A&M, 2020), 24–25.

17 See Sharon Street, "Constructivism About Reasons," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 3, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford University Press, 2008), 223. See also Sharon Street, "What Is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?," *Philosophy Compass* 5 (2010): 369.

18 Street, "Constructivism About Reasons," 229.

19 Street, "Constructivism About Reasons," 230.

20 Christian Miller, "Constructivism," in *Moral Arguments for God's Existence: Navigating the Terrain*, ed. David Baggett and John E. Hare (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Miller's adroit analysis at several points enhanced our work in this chapter.

21 Street, "Constructivism About Reasons," 244.

22 Miller, "Constructivism."

23 Street, "What Is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?," 371.

24 See Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 321.

25 Moreland and Horner, *Metaethics*, 87.

26 Moreland and Horner, *Metaethics*, 88.

[27] William Alston, “What Euthyphro Should Have Said,” in *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, ed. William Lane Craig (Rutgers University Press, 2002), 283–98.

[28] Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (Palgrave, 2008), 54–60.

[29] Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Harvard University Press, 2006). More recently, see his *Morality, Authority, and Law* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[30] C. Stephen Evans, “Does Darwall’s Morality of Accountability Require Moral Realism? (And Would It Be Strengthened by Adding God to the Story?),” *Religions* 12, no. 3 (2021): 187.

[31] Evans, “Darwall’s Morality of Accountability,” 187.

[32] Evans, “Darwall’s Morality of Accountability,” 187.

[33] Evans, “Darwall’s Morality of Accountability,” 187.

[34] Thomas V. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 178.

10

Moral Realism

This section of the book has been about moral realism and its alternatives. So far we have spent most of our time arguing against those alternatives. In this final chapter, we wish to consolidate a number of our findings. We are especially interested in laying out a cumulative case in favor of strong moral realism—the sort of realism that holds out the hope for something evidentially significant about the nature of reality.

We want to apportion our conclusions to the caliber of the evidence and lay the case out piece by piece. We do not pretend to have one simple, single discursive argument that can do all the necessary work, especially in light of the plethora of objections that get lodged against morality realistically construed. We find the cumulative power of an array of evidential considerations to be quite strong support for robust moral realism. The overall case is still resistible, admittedly, but at a steeper price than we are willing to pay.

A Swinburnian Preliminary

A preliminary before getting started is a quick summary of Richard Swinburne's distinction between C-inductive and P-inductive arguments. A C-inductive argument makes its conclusion more likely than it was previously. A P-inductive argument makes its conclusion more likely than not. A C-inductive argument makes a conclusion more probable but without rendering the conclusion more likely true than not. Most of the arguments below, taken in isolation, are advanced as examples of C-inductive arguments. Pointing to any one of the arguments in particular and

suggesting that it does not make robust moral realism likely true, then, may well be accurate but would be redundant. It is not our aspiration to suggest that any one of the following arguments, in isolation, is enough to make the case. Our intention, though, is to suggest that taking the set of arguments as a whole may well constitute what Swinburne calls a P-inductive argument. The conjunction of the set of arguments, in other words, arguably may well collectively render strong moral realism more likely true than false. Of course, readers will have to come to their own conclusions about how successful the effort is.

So let us consider some of the best reasons to take robust moral realism seriously. Then we will quickly consider reasons why theism should remain a living possible explanation of various moral facts.

A Half Dozen Arguments for Robust Moral Realism

Our hope here is to canvass the field, without any pretense of being exhaustive; and as we do so, it is important to recognize that little to nothing rides on each and every one of these arguments' proving successful. A successful argument, taken in isolation, for present purposes, need only add some plausibility to moral realism. None of the arguments by itself need to render moral realism likely true; the litmus test will be if enough of them together can do so. Part of that test will involve the need to be attentive to the way in which the various arguments bolster, augment, and strengthen one another. It is not a simple matter of their mechanical conjunction; there is, we will argue, a synergy that emerges in which the power of the overall case is more than mere addition. The resources of some of the arguments can address objections to others, for example; the overall resultant picture is one that we find quite attractive. The list is meant more as a suggestive discussion starter than an effort to say all that needs to be said.

Incomplete Alternatives Argument

To begin with, what we have argued throughout this volume is that the alternatives to moral realism leave too much to be desired. Michael Huemer

thinks that this approach does a great deal of the heavy lifting in making the case for ethical objectivity. Moral realism is, on this approach, simply the best among the options on offer. Although we refrain from putting all our proverbial eggs in this basket, we do think it is highly telling that the metaethical rivals to moral realism do indeed seem riddled with intractable problems.

By way of a very brief review, the main gist of *error theory* is that morality, robustly construed, is irremediably odd ontologically speaking. Belief in stance-independent moral truths is taken to be beyond the pale. The more parsimonious position is to disavow their existence; it is not clear that they do much explanatory work anyway. In a nutshell, our response to this approach is to ask which intuition is the more compelling: that there are no stance-independent moral truths (like detractors of moral realism insist) or, say, that setting fire to babies for fun is wrong. We do not think it is a particularly close call, in truth. The deliverances of morality involve intuitions or apprehensions of the deepest ingression; eschewing them involves a prohibitively steep price.

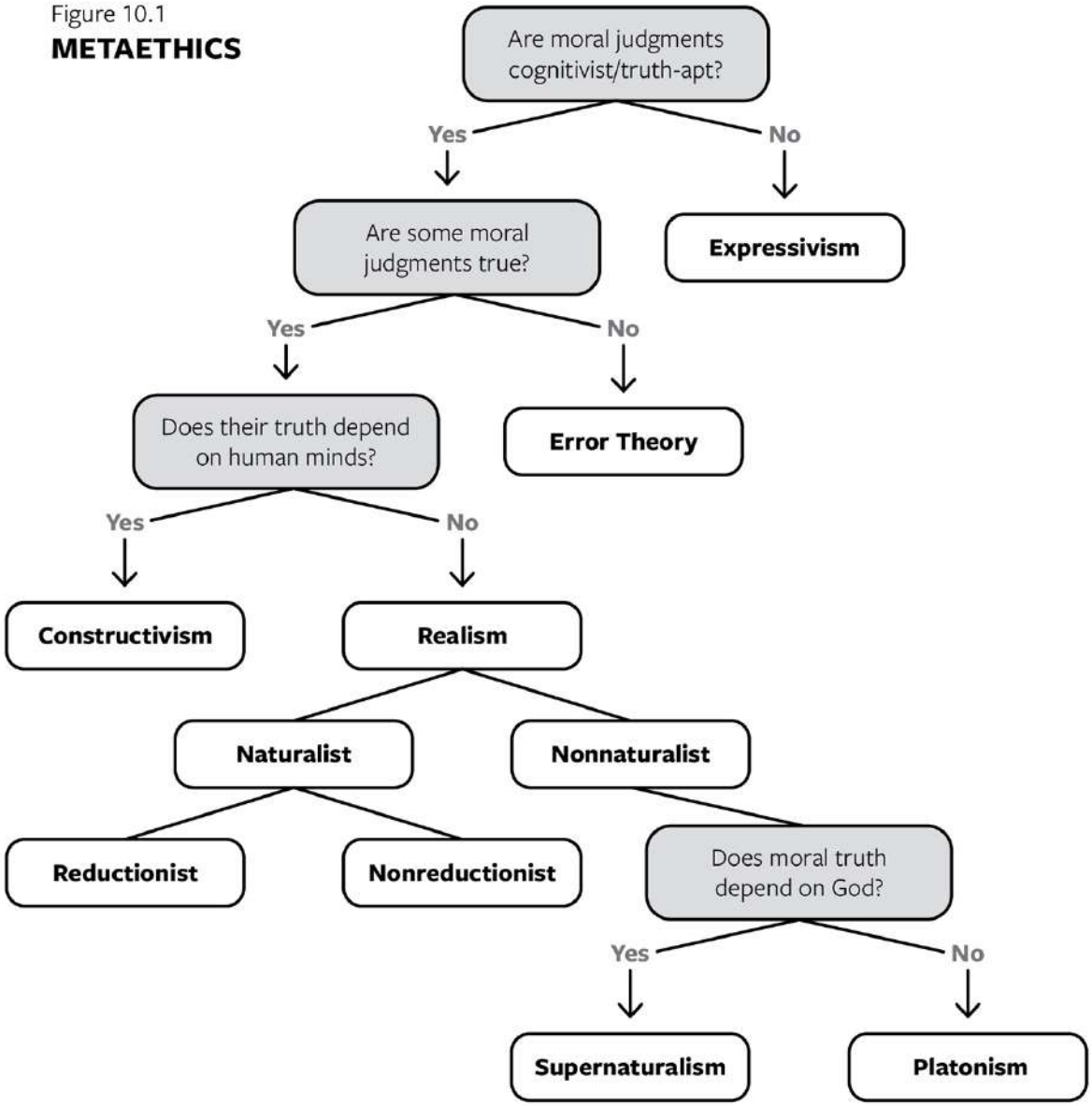
We are convinced that it would be rational to give up such intuitions only on the basis of a powerful argument indeed, which we do not consider the error theorists to have provided. The appeal to parsimony at the root of what tends to be their largest concern—what Olson calls irreducible normativity—strikes us as an inadequate reason to give up the notion of moral authority. We would echo William James that our bigger fear than superstition on such a matter is fear of desiccation. This point is especially important when we bear in mind that a moral error theory will debunk not just deontic oughtness claims but even such basic value commitments as the essential dignity, equality, and value of human persons. And of course, remember the point that on theism, moral facts robustly construed are not odd in the least!

Regarding *expressivism*, its earliest version was predicated on logical positivism, which has been debunked as self-referentially incoherent. Its later versions left positivism behind but were still based on scientism. Whether the import of moral sentences is taken to be expressing or evincing emotions, serving the purpose of persuasion, or commanding others, expressivism is bereft of adequate resources to enable us to say all that needs to be said about predation, genocide, and abuse. Prescriptivity

without the moral facts on which any genuine moral authority is based is feckless. One's philosophical default position should not incline in the direction of jettisoning those commitments and convictions on which we have the greatest clarity. As Anscombe or Foot would argue, if one's metaethical stance does not have enough resources to condemn the Nazis, so much the worse for one's theory! In fact, we cannot help but wonder why those who think that morality lacks cognitive purchase would consider the wrapping of emotions or efforts at persuasion in the language of morality as warranted unless they, quite simply, recognize that the import of such language is likely to be construed as suggesting something more.

With respect to *constructivism*, the notion that morality is a function of the preferences, choices, or prerogatives of either individuals or larger groups, actual or hypothetical, may work reasonably well as an account of matters of civil law but seems to fail as a way to undergird moral truth. Ethical relativism is a paradigmatic example, and its problems are legion. Ideal observer theory seems a move in a better direction but remains saddled with Euthyphro-type challenges. Does the ideal observer by his hypothetical determinations determine the content of morality or apprehend it—invent it or discover it? If the former, morality seems objectionably arbitrary; if the latter, moral realism is left unscathed. Our reasons to refrain from frivolously drowning a child do not plausibly come from the nature of inwardly generated mental processes alone but rather because we recognize an objective duty to refrain from such hideous actions.

Figure 10.1
METAETHICS



What we find especially telling, in the face of the challenges posed for each of these perspectives, is that moral realism can be cast in such a way to capture the legitimate strengths that each provides. Robust moral realists share much in common with error theorists, most of all a view of moral prescriptivity that is strong and not watered down. With expressivists they are at liberty to share the notion that to affirm the goodness of something involves, in part, an implicit endorsement of it, leaving open the question of whether there is an external referent. With constructivism strong moral realists can, contra Huemer's question-begging claim to the contrary,

reconcile robust realism with mind-dependence, so long as objectivity, authority, and necessity are not compromised in the process. (Fig. 10.1 can help visualize the landscape of metaethics.)

Cuneo's Epistemic Parity Argument

Terence Cuneo's *The Normative Web* defends moral realism on the grounds of an epistemic parity argument.[1] The argument can be put pithily as follows:

1. If moral facts do not exist, then epistemic facts do not exist.
2. Epistemic facts exist.
3. Moral facts exist.
4. If moral facts exist, then moral realism is true.
5. So, moral realism is true.

This argument goes beyond a critique of the alternatives to moral realism. It argues positively in favor of such realism. It is an example of a "partners in guilt" approach. Since epistemic standards—coherence, simplicity, warranted assertibility, and so on—have (nonmoral) normative implications and are sufficiently similar to moral facts (if such there be), belief in the former should soften us up to belief in moral standards that are analogous in certain respects. Objectivity, prescriptivity, and universality all seem to be salient features of epistemic standards, and of mathematical ones for that matter. Moreover, epistemic standards are intractable features of reasoning well; the very notion of reasoning well seems predicated on their existence. Denying epistemic facts results in extreme epistemological skepticism.

The argument is not without its critics and detractors, but we find it telling that a philosopher of no less repute than Hilary Putnam finds such a consideration a quite persuasive argument in favor of moral realism. It certainly should not be dismissed prematurely. As Cuneo argues, the alternative positions come at a prohibitively high theoretical cost, so realism about both epistemic and moral facts is attractive.[2]

Modal Ontological Argument

This argument takes its inspiration from the modal ontological argument for God's existence. It has come in different forms—advanced by the likes of Huemer and Coombs—but this is another variant:

1. Some putative objective moral truths are such that, if they are true, they are necessarily true.
2. It is possible that at least one of these putative objective moral truths is true.
3. So at least one of these putative objective moral truths is necessarily true.
4. If at least one of these putative objective moral truths is necessarily true, then at least one of these putative objective moral truths is actually true.
5. At least one of these putative objective moral truths is actually true.
6. So, moral realism is true.[3]

Motivation for the premises is as follows: After the first two premises, everything follows logically with airtight precision. The premises one might wish to subject to critical scrutiny are the first two, especially the second.

The first premise (that some putative objective moral truths are such that, if they are true, they are necessarily true) is largely based on the widely accepted notion of supervenience. Moral truths are often thought to be, if true, not merely contingently true, but necessarily true. They do not just happen to be true, like your happening to be reading this book right now. Rather, they are such that, if they are true in one world (to use possible-world semantics), they are true in all worlds. This is a function of supervenience. If a moral claim is true in some world or other, then it is arguably true in any other world that's exactly like it descriptively. Supervenience of the moral is a widely accepted thesis.

This moves our discussion to the second premise. Just as we find with the modal ontological argument for God's existence in the philosophy of religion, this is the most contested premise. The idea here is that it is metaphysically possible that, say, child torture for fun is wrong, or genocide of a peace-loving society is wrong, or skinning people alive who drive on the wrong side of the road is wrong—at least prima facie wrong. The

possibility in question is not mere epistemic possibility—the idea that, for all we know, it is wrong. Rather, it is the idea that it is a genuine metaphysical possibility that some such action is genuinely wrong—in something like a robustly realist sort of way. If this is the case, then at least for some of these moral judgments it is not just true but true in every possible world. And the rest of the argument then goes through to the conclusion that robust moral realism obtains.

How might one wish to resist the idea that some such moral claim is possibly true? Taking a play from the philosophy of religion, we might run a parity argument against it the way Gaunilo tried to do against Anselm. Anselm argued that since God by definition is the greatest possible being and to exist is greater than not existing, therefore God exists. Others, notably Kant, denied that existence is a predicate. Existence is not a property of a thing; rather, a thing must exist in order to have any properties at all.

But arguably such maneuvers do not work as well against the modal ontological argument for moral realism. Why? Because here we are not talking about the greatest conceivable being and its properties. Our argument does not assume that existence is a great-making property. Rather, the claim is simply that some moral judgment is possibly true. We need not make appeal to the notion of perfection or a discussion about existence in the mind versus existence in reality. It is a simpler claim that some moral claim or other is at least possibly true. On the surface of it, this seems like an eminently reasonable claim. Usually people would not hesitate to affirm that child torture is wrong, but to ask if such a claim is at least possibly true is even less ambitious. But granting that premise means the argument is good to go. The fact that it then leads to a conclusion that one might not like is not a good enough reason for one to deny what had earlier seemed obvious.

What if someone were to respond by saying that possibility is cheap? Why not simply say, with respect to any particular moral judgment, that it is possible that it is not true? How might one reply to that challenge? Well, hark back to the discussion of God's existence. The reason some might wish to argue that God's existence is not possible is usually rooted in an argument of some sort. For example, one might wish to argue that the alleged great-making properties of God are not consistent or that they lack

coherence. But this issue does not arise in the moral context, so such standard arguments against God's existence (including the problem of evil or hiddenness) do not have the same purchase. And, in truth, it remains quite unclear why it would be impossible for any moral claim to be possibly true. Most arguments against realism—queerness arguments or debunking arguments or moral arguments—usually imply that moral realism is false, not impossible.

As long as some moral claim is possible, this argument would suggest we adjust our credences and argue that moral realism is more plausible than all the arguments against its plausibility, even if taken together. This argument might be taken to boost the credibility of moral realism considerably. The rule from modal logic on which the argument is predicated (that possible necessity entails necessary necessity) is also widely accepted, and rejecting the argument on the basis of resisting this recondite feature of modal logic seems a tenuous basis for denying the force of the argument.

Moorean Argument

Sometimes the phrase is used that "one person's modus ponens is another's modus tollens." Here is modus ponens (where A and B are propositions):

1. A implies B.
2. A.
3. Therefore, B.

For example: If it is wrong for one to steal, then stealing makes one morally guilty. It is wrong for one to steal. So, stealing renders one morally guilty. That is an instance of modus ponens.

Modus tollens, another valid argument form, effects a switch and looks like this:

1. A implies B.
2. Not B.
3. So, not A.

Using the same example, the argument now looks like this: If it is wrong for one to steal, then stealing makes one morally guilty. Stealing does not make one morally guilty. So, it is not wrong for one to steal.

Both arguments, of course, start with a shared premise ("If it is wrong for one to steal, then stealing makes one morally guilty"). But whereas the "moralist" affirms the wrongness of stealing and infers that stealing results in moral guilt, the "skeptic" denies that stealing results in moral guilt (objective moral guilt, presumably) and then infers that stealing is not wrong. In this way, modus ponens can shift into modus tollens, or vice versa, resulting in quite different results, diametrically opposite ones, in fact. Effecting such a transition is sometimes called a "Moorean shift," named after G. E. Moore, whom we have had occasion to discuss already.

Earlier there was recurring mention of the Moorean argument for moral realism. In the original version of the argument, Moore was responding to skeptics who deny the existence of the external world. Skeptics might put it like this: If we cannot know that the external world is real, we are not able to show any aspect of that world; we cannot know that the external world is real; so we are unable to show any aspect of it. Moore's response involves his famous shift: Imagine him showing his hand, then another. Since his hands are part of the external world, he has thereby shown the external world to exist. Modus ponens replaces modus tollens.

Now, on the surface of it, this seems problematic and overly simplistic, but there is a way to capture his logic here that is quite intuitive. In philosophy one finds an array of revisionary views that, if true, would change our understanding of reality in fundamental ways—from nihilism about consciousness, time, motion, meaning, other minds, and more. One way to combat such arguments is via a Moorean argument. This includes answering an argument for moral skepticism, thus providing an argument for moral realism.

Here is how Eric Sampson puts one version of this argument:

1. If it is pro tanto objectively wrong to punch a helpless child, then there is at least one objective moral truth.
2. It is pro tanto objectively wrong to punch a helpless child.
3. So, there is at least one objective moral truth.

4. If there is at least one objective moral truth, then moral realism is true.
5. So, moral realism is true.

The first objection likely to be raised is with premise 2: It is pro tanto objectively wrong to punch a helpless child.[4] Doesn't this beg the question? Sampson suggests that what Moore is doing is offering a meta-argument: an invitation to consider the relative plausibility of different arguments. Arguments for moral skepticism will likely feature highly controversial premises, such as this: There are no stance-independent moral truths, or moral propositions cannot plausibly be thought to possess prescriptively binding authority. In contrast, the Moorean premise is highly uncontroversial, at least aside from moral nihilists. To most everyone, it seems eminently plausible that punching a helpless child is wrong, and this is just what Moore is pointing out. In this way, Moore invites us to compare the two arguments—the argument for moral nihilism, whatever it happens to be, and this argument for moral realism. Determining which one we should accept, if either, becomes a matter of plausibility comparison.

Among better potential objections to such an argument is the evolutionary debunking objection, which posits that evolution fitted us with beliefs like the wrongness of punching helpless children but that such beliefs are not true (or at least not justified to be thought to be true). A theistic account renders such objections less than compelling by allowing for the possibility of evolution's being a guided process, but secularists can pose a challenge of their own to the debunkers.[5] Either we can know some moral truths or not. If so—and we might be wrong about some of them, but we can self-correct as needed with rational reflection—they can then provide an account of how such substantive truths came to be believed reliably. If not, then we know nothing about morality because we do not know the first thing about it. Additionally, whether debunking objections are successful is a highly controversial matter, which should result in a loss of confidence in them to a significant degree. In contrast, virtually everyone agrees we should not punch innocent kids. The Moorean argument therefore comes out on top again.

Finally, we can also debunk the debunkers. Maybe morality is onerous and leads to inconvenient obligations, and it is more pleasant for debunkers

to think we do not have such obligations. Or some philosophers have an abnormal fear of being duped; others like to wear the black hat and relish taking the iconoclastic position of nihilism. Yet for others, views like moral skepticism are rewarded in their circles for being novel, and they might like the professional or psychological benefits for embracing it. Some might inordinately enjoy the sense of cleverness they think attaches to nihilism, whereas others hold an exaggerated allegiance to science and its association with this view. Positing such possibilities is easy but also of little evidential value. In short, whereas debunking objections does not strike us as particularly lethal for moral realism, Moorean arguments for moral realism do seem to hold water.

Deliberative Indispensability

David Enoch's book defending moral realism offers an argument from deliberative indispensability that, in broad outline, goes as follows. The notion of deliberative indispensability (DI) can usually be compared and contrasted with explanatory indispensability. The latter is often used in mathematics and science to provide grounds for justified beliefs about, say, electrons, despite the fact that they are unobservable. The warrant for claiming justification for believing in them, despite this, derives from the role they play in providing scientists needed help to explain aspects of the world and various observations. Appealing to a model that includes electrons enhances scientists' ability to explain what they *can* observe. The unattractive prospect of efforts to explain the world without appealing to electrons renders it justifiable to posit their existence and, on that basis, to believe in their existence. In this way, explanatory indispensability is thought to provide justification for a variety of existence claims, even of unobservables.

DI is different in key respects but relevantly similar. It can be used to posit the existence and thus ground rational justification for belief in normative truths construed realistically. Like serious scientific efforts to figure out the nature of empirical reality, the project of deliberation in normative and prescriptive matters is an eminently worthwhile and important endeavor. And since it arguably cannot be done well without

positing mind-independent normative realities, this likewise justifies the positing of their existence and the belief that they exist.

The argument can be formulated as follows:

1. If something is instrumentally indispensable to an intrinsically indispensable project, then we are epistemically justified for just that reason to believe in it.
2. The deliberative project is instrumentally indispensable.
3. Irreducibly normative truths are indispensable to the deliberative project.
4. So, we are justified to believe that such normative truths exist.

By "deliberative project" is meant the effort to figure out how to live. We cannot live our lives without deliberating how we ought to. We do it virtually every second of every day. We seem unable to avoid it. Such a project is both descriptively nonoptional and rationally nonoptional: the kind of thing that we cannot help but do, and something we should not stop doing. Whereas playing tennis or checkers is the kind of thing we are not forced to do, explanatory and deliberative projects are forced on us.

The project of deliberation, then, is intrinsically indispensable. Moreover, it requires normative truths realistically construed, just as doing science relies on perception, memory, induction, and the like. In all of these cases, something is instrumentally indispensable. Regarding normative truths, though, this claim that they are instrumentally indispensable to the deliberative project is likely the most controversial claim. It seems to possess a fair bit of intuitive support, however. For when deliberating we are involved in trying to figure out what to do, which seems to be about getting at some fact of the matter independent of our minds. It has all the feel of coming to a conclusion about a factual question, but this could be true only if we are thinking that there are mind-independent normative truths. So, on this basis, we are epistemically justified to believe there are mind-independent normative truths, and among such truths would be specifically moral truths realistically construed.

The import of the argument is that belief in robust moral truths is at least as respectable as belief in such realities and faculties as numbers, induction,

testimony, memory, perception, or inferences to the best explanation, in light of the parity between moral truths and these others. One objection we wish to consider at this point, however, gets lodged by those who insist that the only legitimate reason to posit the existence of anything is if it does explanatory work. Whereas explanatory indispensability involves a legitimate inference, DI does not, according to the detractors; the comparison, they insist, is predicated on a disanalogy.

By way of reply, it bears repeating that some do wish to argue that generally normative and specifically moral truths can do important explanatory work. We ourselves believe they do. For example, they arguably provide reasons and justifications for why certain actions are considered morally right or wrong; they generate a framework to understand and explain the moral qualities of situations and behaviors; they facilitate people critically evaluating and making sense of ethical dilemmas.

Suppose, though, contrary to fact, that they do not explain anything. If we further accept the notion that such truths, to be justifiably posited, have to explain some observable phenomena, the result would be a rejection of all normative truths. That is quite a bullet to bite and an inordinately high price to pay, and pointing out the prohibitive cost of a view is one way to argue against its plausibility. The very impracticability of denying a proposition arguably provides some amount of evidence in its favor.

The Abolition of Man

C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man* defends objective moral values in the face of the subjectivism and emotivism of Lewis's day. Lewis had fought in the First World War, which had haunted his dreams ever since, and he wrote *Abolition* during the Second World War as England faced a particularly formidable foe that was not averse to perpetrating the most unspeakable of atrocities. Indeed, it was in the face of moral evil he found a renewed incentive to play his intellectual part in the battle. Earlier we discussed the pivotal role of war in motivating an answer to subjectivists and expressivists, and this is one specific example.

Although Lewis was a theist and a Christian, *Abolition* makes little mention of his religious faith. He sees the project as prior to religious conviction, in a real way; the book is an argument for something like

natural law, what Lewis calls the "*Tao*."[6] His use of this iconic locution from a non-Western religious tradition is designed to underscore the universality of the natural law. He ends the book with his famous appendix that outlines a vast swath of basic moral agreements throughout history and the world over. Just as we have taken secular moral realists to be mainly allies in this section of the book, Lewis, too, in *Abolition*, intentionally accentuates connections with moral realists, both secular and religious, "pagans" not the least, who believe in objective right and wrong and an honest humanism.[7] Here Lewis is definitely working in the tradition of thinking of the natural law as accessible via reason and rationality, then confirmed, amplified, and refined by further rational reflection and various religious and philosophical traditions.[8]

Lewis begins by pointing out the view, featuring a rich historical pedigree, that there are such things as just sentiments. That there are false sentiments is true but obvious and not as interesting as the fact that they should be replaced by right sentiments. Some emotional responses to various states of affairs are fitting and congruous, while others are ill-fitting and incongruous. Lewis thinks that those trained in (what Augustine called) "ordinate affections" or "just affections" easily locate the "first principles" of ethics. Moral goodness and the moral law—a conception common to Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental traditions alike—constitute the *Tao*: "the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kinds of things we are."[9]

Lewis practically sounds the theme of virtue epistemology in emphasizing that who we are shapes what we are able to see, and he suggests that the *Tao* is something that we should be able to apprehend. It is less a conclusion we draw from other evidence than a proper starting point, once we have been properly socialized and humanized. When the time is right, we should be able to recognize the demand for a proper response: empathy for one who is suffering, for example, or the propriety of rectifying patent injustices, dehumanization, or casual cruelty. Lewis accords vital importance to sentiment, but not the way that either subjectivists or emotivists do. Rather, he does so more similarly to the way John Hare's prescriptive realism does: We recognize an objective demand for a sort of volitional endorsement. We recognize in that moment something that bears

affinity to us; Lewis would gravitate toward reflective sentimentalism according to which our sensibilities function semiotically, pointing to an external referent. The process is not so much discursive ratiocination as experiential appropriation; it is more holistic than merely intellectual.

Recall how such a picture resonates with moral intuition, a healthy conscience, or direct apprehension. The truths of the *Tao* are self-evident; in modern parlance we might invoke notions of proper basicality and phenomenal conservatism providing reasons, both internalist and externalist, to take such immediate recognitions and broadly empirical apprehensions as veridical.[10] Reid's common sense and Lewis's *Tao* underscore largely the same phenomenon. And like Reid, Lewis makes strides to integrate and effect a rapprochement between the affections and the intellect.

In Lewis's case, the image he prefers is not head and heart, but head, belly, and chest. The head represents the intellect, the belly the sensations, and the chest the integration of the rational and the sensuous, producing stable sentiments and discovering ourselves as human beings in the process. Expressivism and subjectivism are dehumanizing, Lewis maintains, "because it makes 'men without chests,' people who have heads and bellies but no capacity to unite their cerebral self and their visceral self in their thorax, which is the definitively human faculty."[11] By one's intellect one is mere spirit, and by appetite mere animal; it is by the middle element, the chest—the seat of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments—that "man is man."[12] In such ways, Lewis does not think we can do ethics without a proper anthropology, the right sense of who and what we are as human beings.

Lewis chooses for his paradigmatic example of the *Tao* the virtue of supreme self-sacrifice, likely because of at least three reasons: the biblical elevation of there being no greater love than laying down one's life for one's friends (John 15:13); the daily reminder of the loss of his wartime friend Paddy Moore; and "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori," a famous line from the Roman lyric poet Horace that translates, "It is sweet and proper to die for one's country."[13] That the notion of a noble death plays a diminished role in society today, Lewis might suggest, is an indication of the sort of trajectory that downplaying the *Tao* produces: "We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour

and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful."[14]

Lewis thinks there is a kind of logical tension if not real incoherence associated with arguing against the *Tao*. The task is inherently self-defeating. Presumably one wishes to argue against moral first principles or the natural law because one thinks it is objectively valuable to avoid error and to obtain the truth. Truth acquisition, or at the very least error avoidance, in other words, is an intrinsic good. But to deny the *Tao* is precisely to deny that there are any such things as intrinsic goods.

Dangers of abandoning the *Tao* multiply. "In closing the coffin-lid on objective value," Ward writes, "humanity has opened Pandora's box."[15] Lewis presciently predicts a sort of inexorable moral devolution: starting with critics casually debunking value, to idealogues offering a hollow epistemological basis for moral judgment, to Nietzschean voluntarists asserting their will to power. Lewis's book is a warning as much as a philosophical treatise, but we consider many of his points well worth careful pondering and chock-full of philosophical perspicacity. Much was, and is, at stake—including the dangers of dehumanization.

Echoing James's greater concern about desiccation and emaciation than about superstition, Lewis concludes his treatment of the *Tao* by warning of the dangers of deflation:

> But you cannot go on "explaining away" forever: you will find that you have explained explanation away. You cannot go on "seeing through" things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to "see through" first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To "see through" all things is the same as not to see.[16]

As we wrap up this section, recall that our suggestion is that it is the conjunction of some or all of these arguments, collectively and cumulatively construed, that potentially constitutes reason to think moral realism is likely. Let us now add a few general observations.

Takeaways

The first observation to make about this list of evidential considerations is the sheer diversity of considerations. The points range over aesthetics and ethics, metaphysics and epistemology, theory and praxis, reason and emotion, discursive argument and more direct apprehension. They encompass philosophical methodology, Moorean shifts, and axioms from modal logic, not to mention parities between morality and epistemic and other value assertions.

The second takeaway is practically entailed: to note the operative epistemological assumptions in our approach. In part this is a reiteration of a recurring point throughout our analysis. We retain great openness to the potentially instructive nature of morality. We consider it to be not a relatively small matter but something that may well have much to teach us about the nature of reality and the human condition. It is not only moral duties that are of concern to us; that is but one part of the moral landscape. It is also inextirpable human rights, issues of human dignity, the dangers of dehumanization, and the wickedness of degradation and predation. Our agenda is not a defense of legalism or vindication of moralism but rather an exploration of the depth of love, the sweetness of mercy, the heartfelt need for justice, and the importance of grace.

The tools to use in delving into such rich topics should include the whole panoply of those at our disposal. This should include discursive philosophical argument, to be sure, but not predicated on an abstemious epistemology. Our preference is for a wide empiricism and expansive rationality. We do not undertake the task by eschewing religious or moral experience a priori; nor do we necessarily take such experiences as flawlessly veridical. They require investigation, critical scrutiny, and careful analysis; we encourage taking such experiences seriously and exploring their relevance with care. This requires taking a close look at the logic, language, and phenomenology of moral experience, for example, which accounts for why we have such great appreciation for insights from the likes of John Henry Newman, William James, and others about the complex and multiform ways a variety of factors—moral, religious, social, psychological, philosophical, aesthetic, relational, affective—can and do play a critical role in persuasion.

So much of the historical debate about ethics has revolved around issues of the head versus the heart. Rationalists have stressed the role of the

intellect and mind; expressivists and sensibility theorists have emphasized the primacy of the affections and sensibilities. There is something ineliminably experiential and existential about morality. In an almost unique way, it involves elements from both the top down and the bottom up, and it seems to point both outward to external realities and inward toward something deeply personal and interior to our experience. In that spirit, we tend to gravitate toward analyses of ethics and moral epistemology that seek a rapprochement between the discursive and the experiential, the head and the heart, passion and reason, the intellect and the imagination. It seems to us that nothing less than this is required if we are going to come to a fuller appreciation of what moral truths there may be to discover. Likewise with our commitment to the value of a cumulative case, a topic as rich as ethics robustly construed should not be conducted as if a single piece of evidence or line of inquiry is enough to get the job done.

Most of part 2 has put the greater emphasis on philosophical, semantic, and logical deliverances, but in the conclusion we hope to extend the discussion a bit beyond those parameters into topics richer with imaginative significance. We wanted to begin with the philosophical, but we will not rest our case on those considerations alone. Philosophers often employ thought experiments to elicit intuitions and test out various ideas, but as some philosophers have noted, something like great literature provides thought experiments of their own—often quite thick, colorful, and powerful ones. We hope in the conclusion to show some ways in which literature can add to our discussion of moral realism by appealing not just to the workings of ratiocination but also to insights from narrative and deliverances from the imagination.

The third and perhaps most substantive takeaway from our investigation is this: If we do not assume naturalism as our default position, then a panoply of significant results becomes possible. We need not be committed to and stultified by the naturalistic and scientistic assumptions that tend to drive expressivism; we can reject human mind-dependence where morality is concerned without closing ourselves off to stance-dependent metaethical accounts that do not compromise objectivity, prescriptivity, and necessity—in short, moral authority. We need not assume that a Humean bottom-up take on morality is sufficient, and we can embrace a sensibility account entirely compatible with both robust moral realism and theistic ethics. And

we need not assume an unguided evolutionary process by inserting theological add-ons to the scientific account; this helps address debunking concerns in an effective manner.

What About Supernaturalism?

Up until now, we have largely treated secular ethical realists as allies. We have great appreciation for their work, and we have learned a great deal from their labors. There is a large swath of agreements we share with them. But as our earlier chart illustrates, there is one final fork in the road where we potentially part ways even with nonnatural moral Platonists, for we retain openness to the wisdom of moving in a more theistic direction instead at that point. We have not ourselves made that case yet, but in this last section of this last chapter of part 2, we wish to suggest some reasons why a supernaturalistic ethic should remain on the table as a viable option worthy of careful consideration. This brief foray, then, goes beyond a mere defense of sturdy moral realism, but recall that, from the start, it was our intent eventually to arrive here, assuming a good enough defense of robust moral realism could be provided. This will set the stage for part 3.

In what follows, ten connections will be briefly noted between metaethics and theism. The list is not meant to be comprehensive; in part it consolidates points made earlier at various junctures, and on some occasions it makes fresh ones. By "supernaturalism" we refer to God in a fairly straightforward sense: God as the possessor of the "omni" qualities and such. Here and there we dip into the great monotheistic traditions to showcase the potential power of standard pieces of theology, such as humans as divine image bearers. We are not pressing these points altogether; the list is at this point meant to be at least suggestive and at most a promissory note, fodder for additional reflection. The brief discussion will also furnish an opportunity to bring a few points full circle or to a tentative measure of closure.

Moral argument against morality. Let us begin with a moral argument against morality, which asks us to suppose that it turns out that, metaphysically speaking, the content of objective morality flies in the face of our deepest moral intuitions. Suppose, for example, that morality were to

dictate that it is right to torture children for fun after all. The idea is that we would be altogether justified to reject such objective morality, and to do so on moral grounds!

As it happens, there is a specifically theistic variant of this concern, rooted in the arbitrariness problems associated with radical voluntarism. If God were able to command us to do just anything, and his commands are morally authoritative, it would render morality arbitrary. This is surely a grave concern for, say, the gods of the Greek pantheon, but as we saw Evans argue, in taking on Darwall's secular ethical theory, the theology of a perfectly good God arguably provides the needed resources to circumvent arbitrariness objections while saving the appearances of morality. We have also traversed quite a bit of ground to show that a radically voluntarist depiction of theistic ethics does not begin to do justice to the complexities of any theistic story a thoroughgoing Anselmian would provide.

Dualism of practical reason. What Sidgwick called the "dualism of practical reason" pertains to the tension between doing what is in one's own self-interest and doing what is best for the groups of which we are a part. Sidgwick thought the problem resides at the heart of the whole ethical enterprise and that, lacking a solution, it is intractable. He did, however, see a potential way out, as did J. L. Mackie—namely, a theistic one. If the world were ordered by a loving and sovereign deity, the dualism of practical reason could be resolved. Both Sidgwick and Mackie saw this, admitting as much, but neither saw it as providing enough evidence for the truth of the theistic hypothesis. In the name of building a potential cumulative case for a theistic ethic, however, we think it should be part of the picture, especially if nothing less is at stake than the very rationality of morality.

Queerness. Recall the various concerns about ontological queerness broached by J. L. Mackie and the way that, by his own admission, supernaturalism would resolve each one of them. In his seminal article "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," George Mavrodes made this very point, pointing to a theistic explanation of morality as arguably the best on offer.[17] Whereas morality might well prove intractably odd in a naturalistic world, it seems to reside altogether comfortably in a supernaturalistic one, vitiating any need to water down or domesticate robust moral categories. At the root of queerness concerns is the issue of moral authority, which we have noted a theistic story seems impeccably equipped to provide.

Mind-dependence. Contra the notion that there is no relevant difference between human mind-dependence and divine mind-dependence, we have noted ways in which divine-mind dependence may well prove no threat whatsoever to objectivity, necessity, and prescriptive authority. Capturing the (divine) mind-dependent elements of morality can help explain its personalist features, and this offers, as we have seen before, a way to integrate great traditions heretofore thought to be at odds. Recall Tom Morris's words to this effect. Arguing that key elements of Platonism and theism can be reconciled, the result, he says, is "a view which both retains the commitments of realism concerning the objective existence and status of abstract entities and modal truths, while at the same time capturing the conviction of anti-realists and conventionalists that such items must be in some sense mind-dependent. And this in itself is quite significant."[18]

Laws and lawgivers. Closely related to that point is this one. Whether the laws at issue in need of explanation be nomological, logical, epistemic, or moral, thinkers from Leibniz to Plantinga to Adams have argued that divine mind-dependence, far from threatening the stability or reality of such laws, may well be their prerequisite and best explanation. Indeed, if something in the vicinity of constant creation is operative, everything apart from God depends on God for its reality. This makes understandable Berkeley's insistence that idealism is true; he was attempting to do justice to the notion that everything radically depends on God, motivated by the fear of worshiping nature once it is thought to be able to exist on its own.[19] We need not be idealists in any problematic sense, though, by more simply pointing to the possibility of the divine mind-dependence of everything there is—from mountains to morals. However radical it sounds, it is, quite simply, a garden-variety entailment of classical monotheism and is one more reason to resist Huemer's downplaying of the human mind-dependence and divine mind-dependence distinction.

Confirmation by special revelation. The sort of story we have pursued here has been driven from the first by philosophical reflection. For a variety of evidential reasons, we have seen as eminently reasonable that there are axiomatic moral starting points and rational deliverances about values, moral and otherwise. We have not appealed to special revelation to get the ball rolling but have tried to see how far philosophical reflection alone might get us. The story, though, does not end there, and what we find as

illuminating as it is heartwarming is the variety of ways that theistic teachings and special revelation can confirm and even extend these deliverances of reason. Teachings held in common by the great monotheistic traditions—for example, about human beings having been made in God's image—arguably provide a finer-grained account of the general revelation that human beings possess great intrinsic value, and, as Kant put it, no mere price. Such theological insights perhaps make unsurprising the historical examples of people—from William Wilberforce to Martin Luther King Jr. to Mother Teresa—expending themselves in service of humanity in visceral recognition of its great inherent dignity, equality, and value.

Nonnaturalism. We find it tremendously telling that the sort of story we have told defending moral realism puts us in league with leading secular metaethicists. Overlapping with their analyses on a great many scores—from cognitivism to nihilism, from expressivism to constructivism, from moral objectivity to nonnaturalism—we resonate with much of their excellent analysis. It is only at the final fork in the road, as it were, the divide between moral Platonism and theistic ethics, where we are inclined to demur and depart from their company. Though this point of divergence is of course no small disagreement, our present point is different: It is easy to overlook all the terrain shared in common.

Telos. Ed Feser has lamented the loss of teleology in much contemporary ethics. Aristotle, of course, by contrast, made issues of teleology central to his ethical analysis. On this score, his approach deeply resonated with, say, Hebraic construals of human teleology that paint the human condition as most satisfied and fulfilled in relation to the divine. Indeed, on classic monotheistic models, we are meant, ultimately, for loving relationships with God and neighbor. This carves out room in theistic ethics not just for efficient and material causes but also for formal and final ones; a shared primacy of teleology forges an important connection and point of resonance between Hellenistic and Hebraic traditions. Such a shared commitment potentially also sheds great light on those issues of anthropology of such concern to a thinker like Lewis. Almost all of this is in direct contrast to stories of twentieth-century naturalistic metaethics.

The moral gap. Invoking a Kantian notion of the moral gap that obtains between what morality realistically construed requires and the best we can

morally perform on our own, John Hare argues that various secular efforts to close the gap fall short. Rather than exaggerating human capacities, lowering the moral demand, or generating a secular solution, the best way to close the gap, he thinks, is something like divine grace. Plausibly, this is a good way in which to motivate, on such performative grounds, a variant of the moral argument that points not just to theism per se but to Christianity in particular. Among deep existential moral needs seem to be forgiveness for wrongdoing, deliverance from shame, moral change and transformation, and principled hope for such a process to reach its culmination. In such Christian doctrines as justification, sanctification, and glorification are found precise parallels, conferring plausibility to such tenets of religious faith.

Explanatory gap. Another gap in the vicinity of ethics is explanatory. Secularists can generate potential solutions of their own to debunking objections to moral knowledge, but theists have good reasons not to add to the evolutionary mix such philosophical add-ons as the notion that the evolutionary process is essentially unguided. By retaining openness to the possibility of a guided process, the theistic ethicist has considerably more and arguably better resources for arguing that theism defeats debunking concerns.

With that, we will draw the discussion of this chapter to a close. We have provided our cumulative case for moral realism, at least in broad outline. We have also provided an assortment of reasons why we think, if such moral realism obtains and is even self-evident, questions of its ultimate explanation remain open. Finally, among living options for such an explanation, we have tentatively suggested, is a theistic account that deserves an important place at the table for the several ways in which it holds promise of answering important and interesting philosophical challenges that organically arise along the way.

CONCLUSION

Arguing for the truth of moral realism involves unique challenges. Perhaps the biggest of all is that some moral truths, if such there be, are simply

axiomatic. Such first principles, as Lewis calls them, by definition are those on the basis of which we are likely to draw other inferences. Usually the axioms are taken for granted; that is, they are more likely to function as premises than conclusions. A nearly insuperable obstacle to arguing in favor of the most basic moral truths is that there is little to appeal to in order to generate the argument. What can be more obvious than the objective wrongness of torturing children?[20] This of course provides much of the incentive to think of such truths as self-evident or intuitive, commonsensical or properly basic. In the face of one who, with furrowed brow, solemnly insists that he simply does not see it, incredulous stares are altogether understandable.

Still, we have attempted to have this conversation and offer various evidences for such truths. Yet other philosophical arguments for moral realism could be discussed—default arguments, folk arguments, primacy of value arguments—but we have decided to stop where we did. Providing such arguments has its point but also its limitations. For those inclined to resist the arguments, there are surely junctures at which questions can be asked and doubts raised.

We would like to do something a little different in this conclusion in order to extend the discussion in a new direction or two. We want to take off our philosophy hats for a few moments and reflect more generally about moral reality and some compelling reasons to take it seriously. Often the sorts of appeals we wish to make here are not exactly the stock in trade among philosophers, but they possess their own persuasive power and, in some cases, evidential force. We have intentionally waited until now to broach these additional considerations in the last stage of our cumulative case for moral realism. We are not casting them as sufficient in themselves to make the case or even as the proper place to begin. Their placement here at the end is a strategic decision designed to round out our overall analysis.

Ideally, we would like to persuade the not-yet-convinced to take moral realism with great seriousness and to feel the force of a cumulative case in its favor. Since persuasion, on the basis of good reasons and evidence, is our goal, Aristotle's great *Rhetoric* naturally comes to mind. In this classic treatment, Aristotle discussed logos, ethos, and pathos—sometimes called the rhetorical triangle—as the best ways to change someone's mind. *Logos* pertains to the issue of logical and rational arguments, adducing evidence,

anticipating objections, and the like. Most typical philosophical arguments most readily fall into such a category, and most of this book is an example. This is occasionally thought to be the only sort of legitimate way to persuade anyone of anything, but it is not.

Aristotle knew that persuasion is a more complicated affair. To this end, he also saw the need for ethos and pathos. *Ethos* pertains to the character of the one doing the persuading. The persuasive work done in the ethos mode refers to establishing authority, credibility, and trust through character and integrity. Appealing to an essentially moral dimension of the very act of arguing for the propriety of assuming the moral stance can seem problematically circular, but there are two points we wish to emphasize here. First, ironically enough, the decision one makes about whether to take morality with sober seriousness does unavoidably appear to be a moral decision. Treating the moral stance as merely optional, for example, involves making a choice about its relative importance and authority. The same could be said about issues of civil legality; if the speed limit is treated as a mere suggestion (as most drivers in Houston do), that very decision will likely yield legal repercussions or something even worse.

Second, there is something existentially compelling about witnessing moral exemplars, as Linda Zagzebski emphasizes in her work on exemplarism. Seeing their love of neighbor, their altruism, and their compassion moves us and inspires us. It helps us see what humanity at its best can be; it makes goodness attractive. Sometimes it is said that evil characters in fiction are the most captivating and compelling, but perhaps thinking so is a failure of imagination. Some years ago, a documentary came out about Fred Rogers, and we remember seeing grown men cry at the beautiful example of this kind, gentle man devoting himself to caring for the intellectual and emotional needs of children. Such a documentary is obviously not a discursive argument but rather an experience of the sort that tugs at the heartstrings, expands one’s moral vision, and moves one to action, fortifying certain convictions in the process.

Pathos touches on our emotions and sentiments. Emotional appeals are often thought to be evidential cheats, circumventing issues of truth and settling for sophistry, and they certainly can be. But not always. Arguably, on occasion, emotional appeals are altogether apposite. Recall Lewis’s insistence that some emotional responses are more appropriate than others.

This is, by the estimation of most, moral common sense. If someone were to witness 9/11 and burst out laughing hysterically seeing people jump to their deaths rather than be burned alive, it would viscerally grate against our deepest sensibilities. We recognize something about such a jaded and inexplicable response that is broken, dysfunctional, and, indeed, culpable. This is just why we are able to apprehend the bad moral fit of casual cruelty or, in wonderful contrast, the beauty of a father's selfless love for his child. These experiential and phenomenological features of moral experience are not without significance. Elizabeth Anscombe noted that while we can study the life of turnips and cats objectively from the outside, the life of humans, for humans, must be studied from within.[21] The lived experience of morality may not entail moral realism, but it is part of a great mosaic; moral realism certainly makes excellent sense of its existence and texture.

The image of a mosaic is apt, as it is something to ponder and relish and study, as is moral experience itself. To make this point, consider a few analogies. Some years ago, my wife and I (Dave) were planning a trip to Europe, which included a foray to France. By happy coincidence, just before the trip I read C. S. Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism*. Among the advice he doles out is, when reading a novel or looking at a painting, to allow it to speak to you in its own voice. Do not prematurely impose on it what you want to hear or examine it through a lens that obscures. Get out of the way and take it in, allowing its voice to do its work. It was great advice, and I applied it when visiting the Louvre soon thereafter, finding the experience to be far richer for it.

Something similar can be said of poetry. One's attitude going into a poem will dictate what one gets from it. There is wisdom, when interpreting a text, in exegeting rather than eisegeting—reading *out of* the text what is there rather than reading *into* it what is not. Similarly, there is wisdom, when reading a novel or poem, or looking at a painting, in allowing it to speak. Likewise with the mosaic of morality, where something analogous can easily happen, and the lens through which we look at it obfuscates more than illumines. Rather, there is wisdom in cultivating ears to hear what it has to say.

Moral goodness, like beauty, carries with it something ineliminably experiential, and recognition of this fact makes it all the more appropriate that any argument for robust moral realism should include elements that go

beyond the purely logical and abstract. Fidelity to one's wife construed as an abstract moral principle alone can carry some conviction, but remembering the distinctly personalist features of morality adds an extra layer of reality and conviction. To cheat is not merely to violate a principle but to violate a personal trust, a real person to whom one has pledged fidelity. Morality is, we have argued, a cognitive matter, but it is not *merely* intellectual. It is phenomenal, personalist, existential, and affective.[22] Philosopher Eleonore Stump writes extensively about nonpropositional knowledge, another sort of knowing, more Franciscan and second person than Dominican, more experiential than mere knowing-that.[23] Personal acquaintance is one example, but meaningful moral experiences, too, arguably carry additional significance beyond mere acquisition of true propositional beliefs. There is often a depth to such experiences that goes beyond the merely propositional.

What makes this more expansive and imaginative approach all the more needed is that philosophy often still operates in the wake of the linguistic turn of the twentieth century that had a dampening effect on exploration of the big questions that occupied classical philosophers: questions about God's existence, the meaning of life, truth, goodness, and beauty. These are replaced with narrow questions about linguistic and semantic analysis, a thin approach to philosophy divested of poetry, mystery, transcendence, metaphysics, or even morality. There is wisdom in conjoining the technical machinery of twentieth-century analytic philosophy with the enduring concerns of philosophy that we can find among, say, the realists and idealists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and among a great many thinkers before that. This is how we can connect "seemingly abstract and esoteric enquiries with the urgent and real, practical, and spiritual questions that confront each of us in our day-to-day lives."[24]

Blaise Pascal was someone who took arguments seriously, both in mathematics and in philosophy, but he also recognized that reason has its limitations. Part of reason is recognition of its limits, he wrote. Famously he put it like this: "The heart itself has its own reason that reason itself cannot understand."[25] He understood better than most that the process of coming to various conclusions in this life involves a risk. We are not just logic-chopping machines dispassionately following the evidence where it leads. We are affective, conative, relational beings continually adjusting our

credences, weighing evidences of all sorts, assigning primacy to certain felt reasons more than others, taking as veridical what we assume are direct apprehensions, allowing ourselves to be persuaded by nondiscursive arguments, discerning what is likely true. The same epistemic boat in which we all find ourselves calls on each of us to play the prophet and take our chances. Some do it better than others, no doubt, but it is not at all clear, at least to us, that the safest way forward is never to risk error for the sake of finding truth.

Regarding belief in God, Pascal, in his *Pensées*, is famous for saying that there is enough evidence for those inclined to believe and enough darkness for those who do not wish to believe. Whatever the merits of such a claim, we might suggest something analogous about moral realism. There is enough evidence for those who want to believe and enough doubt that can be raised for the skeptic to disbelieve. William James once said it is an irrational rule that prevents one from finding truths that are really there to be found. Suppose for a moment that the widespread conviction is true that there are some objective moral truths that are essentially axiomatic and self-justified instances of moral common sense. A feature of just such first principles would be that there is a real limitation in how far reason can go to argue for their existence. It remains, then, the prerogative to say that this very limitation of reason goes to show that the argument(s) for such robust moral realities is (are) weak and that, on pain of irrationality, one should refrain from believing them. But that very decision procedure itself involves epistemic guesswork, not without risk, and a guess that, in the minds of many if not most, both flies in the face of what seems obvious and carries an inordinately steep price.

This is no knockdown argument for moral realism, nor an effort to cast moral skeptics as either irrational or perverse. Much of the import of this conclusion, in fact, is a disavowal of any effort to provide any such argument or even to say there is such an argument. Still, we consider there to be ample principled reasons for taking moral realism seriously, while admitting that there may well be an element of volition involved. Volitional questions where our beliefs are concerned are, of course, a vexed matter; most of the time, in truth, we do not exert direct volitional control over them. When we see a chair in front of us, we typically do not choose to believe there is a chair there. We simply find ourselves believing it (a vivid

dream is one of the rare exceptions). Similarly, the thesis of robust moral realism is one we tend to find ourselves either believing or doubting. Still, though, it seems at least likely that we can and do exert indirect volitional control over our beliefs. Whether, for example, we choose to privilege avoiding error or acquiring the truth will invariably shape our perspective, over time, on all sorts of important philosophical questions.

It is unsurprising that William James recognized the important role volition plays in decisions about morality. In the context of discussing the propriety of making "passional decisions" when certain conditions obtain—a forced question, indecisive evidence, and a momentous question—he broached the matter of morality as a paradigmatic example:

> The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will. Are our moral preferences true or false, or are they only odd biological phenomena, making things good or bad for us, but in themselves indifferent? How can your pure intellect decide? If your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one. . . . Moral skepticism can no more be refuted or proved by logic than intellectual skepticism can. When we stick to it that there is truth (be it of either kind), we do so with our whole nature, and resolve to stand or fall by the results. The skeptic with his whole nature adopts the doubting attitude, but which of us is the wiser, Omniscience only knows.[26]

Supposing that the evidence for moral realism is indeed indecisive—which is consistent with the preponderance of evidence in its favor, depending on the stringency of the burden of proof—and the decision to endorse it or not is forced, the question of its momentous nature is little in dispute. Whether we take morality seriously has significant existential repercussions. There is nothing merely academic about this decision, as one tragic chapter of history after another amply shows. Recall the impact that seeing the Holocaust play out in real time had on such philosophers as Philippa Foot and Elizabeth Anscombe. It quite redirected their philosophical work to combat those metaethical theories that are inadequate to the task of saying what is wrong with such horrific atrocities and unspeakable dehumanization as the Nazis perpetrated.

If, however, there is no *Tao*, no objective axiomatic moral truths, then there is no real ascription of objective moral guilt; indeed, arguably there is nothing deeply wrong with such dehumanization. Unless human value is real, people are bereft of their basic human moral rights, and the sorts of atrocities that turn our stomachs instantiate no property of objective moral

wrongness at all: from the slaughter of Jews and Poles and homosexuals during the Holocaust to the killing of counterrevolutionaries under communist China to the rape, torture, maiming, and murder of hundreds of thousands of Chinese in Nanking by the Japanese army in 1937, and plenty more besides. Dehumanization, predation, and torture seem to cry out for denunciation in the strongest of moral terms, but if moral realism is false, such appearances are deceptive. Drafters of documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights assumed otherwise, aiming to safeguard human dignity, condemn patent injustice, and make clear that certain cruel, inhuman, degrading behaviors are beyond the moral pale and should always be legally proscribed.

Not only is history replete with powerful tales of moral heroism and villainy; so also is literature, which leads some philosophers to tap into great fictional narratives for thick, full-blooded moral language, illustrations, and thought experiments that elicit the right sorts of viscerally affective responses. Martha Nussbaum is one example, but Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, among others, were avid storytellers. Eleonore Stump sees poetic prefaces in her chapters of *Wandering in Darkness* as ineliminable parts of her philosophical argument, contributing above and beyond what discursive argument can. Christina Hoff Sommers is another example, using literary stories in her philosophy classes as a countervailing influence to what she calls “dilemma ethics” that subtly reinforce the thought that all ethics is colored gray.[27] Stories of beautiful virtue or ugly vice have, she thinks, a salutary effect on the character of readers who are not left wondering what lesson to take from morally ambiguous thought experiments and dilemma case studies.

Incidentally, by pointing to the importance of literature, we are not suggesting a simplistic use of literature to look for the “morals” of the stories. Mark Twain himself wrote about *Huckleberry Finn* that those who try to find a motive in the narrative will be prosecuted, those who try to find a moral in it will be banished, and those who try to find a plot in it will be shot.[28] The delicate offering of literature to the investigation of ethics is subtler than that. A. E. Taylor captured such an insight in his classic *Faith of a Moralist*:

> We all attach great weight to Shakespeare's interpretations of human life, or Dante's, or Pascal's, or Wordsworth's; even when we reject their testimony, we at least do not reject it lightly. I believe it would be safe to say that Plato is the only metaphysician whose verdicts on things human we ascribe anything like this significance, and the reason is manifest. It is that Plato was so much more than the author of a philosophical theory; he was one of the world's supreme dramatists, with the great dramatist's insight into a vast range of human character and experience, an insight only possible to a nature itself quickly and richly responsive to a world of suggestion which narrower natures of the specialist type miss. If I am found in the sequel appealing to the testimony of "moralists," I trust it will be understood that by moralists I do not mean primarily men who have devoted themselves to the elaboration of ethical systems, the Aristotles, or even the Kants, but men who have lived richly and deeply and thought as well as lived, the Platos, Augustines, Dostoevskys, and their fellows.[29]

Hoff Sommers suggests that to understand *King Lear*, *Oliver Twist*, or *Huckleberry Finn* requires that the reader have some understanding of (and sympathy with) what the author is saying about the moral ties that bind the characters and that hold in place the social fabric in which they play their roles. "Literary figures can thus provide students with the moral paradigms that Aristotle thought were essential to moral education." She asks, "Have we not learned a thing or two over the past several thousand years of civilization? To pretend we know nothing about basic decency, about human rights, about vice and virtue, is fatuous and disingenuous. Of course we know that gratuitous cruelty and political repression are wrong, that kindness and political freedom are right and good. Why should we be the first society in history that finds itself hamstrung in the vital task of passing along its moral tradition to the next generation?"[30]

One more literary example will suffice. Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" is a remarkable short story. It features Hulga, an embittered young woman who had studied philosophy and become a complete moral (and religious) skeptic. Cocooned within her shell, she is closed off to other people until a young Bible salesman comes along and treats her kindly. Gradually she opens herself up to him, until a climactic scene in which she makes herself completely vulnerable. At just that moment he horribly betrays her confidence and reveals who he really is: a swindler and a knave. Hulga is apoplectic, her face nearly purple. She, the alleged skeptic, blurts out, "You're a fine Christian! You're just like them all—say one thing and do another. You're a perfect Christian, you're . . ."

The boy's mouth was set angrily. "I hope you don't think," he said in a lofty indignant tone, "that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going!"[31]

Hulga's skepticism about right and wrong, good and evil, vice and virtue, was safe in the abstract, but its implications were more hideous than words when encountered in reality. In just such vivid ways, good literature can fire the imagination and help readers more clearly apprehend the import and implications of ideas. "The thought of great makers of literature who have been also great readers of the human heart may be much more important than the speculations of the professed metaphysician or psychologist."[32] If our quest is not just for analytic rigor and technical machinery but for genuine wisdom and true understanding, alongside philosophical discourses lining our shelves should be short stories and novels, folktales and poems and allegories. Philosophy, truth be told, can use more diversity, its deserts occasionally needing better irrigation. On this point, Mary Midgley argued that the solipsism, skepticism, and individualism so characteristic of the philosophical tradition would not feature in a world written by people who had shared intimate friendships with spouses and lovers, been pregnant, raised children, and enjoyed rich and full and varied lives.[33]

We are all on a journey of exploration in this haunted dream of life, and the choice of whether to do our best to gain understanding and acquire wisdom is up to us. Is moral realism true? We modestly submit that to answer such a question requires a long, patient look at the evidence, carefully attending to its various manifestations, giving it the chance to accumulate and coalesce and have its say. Logical and philosophical arguments and evidences are a great place to begin, to be sure, but one should not stop there. Be content with nothing less than an expansive rationality and generous empiricism. Be open as well to nondiscursive evidence and Franciscan knowledge, axiomatic intuitions and direct apprehensions, moral common sense, self-evidence, and visceral reasons of the heart and imagination. Be eclectic and virtuous in your epistemology, privileging both the abstract and the concrete, theory and praxis, the head and the heart. Heed the inspiration derived from moral heroes and exemplars and a guiding love of wisdom and quest for understanding, reading great literature along the way. Become reconciled to the risks

involved in acquiring truth, not content to avoid error alone and ending up following irrational rules in the process. Notice the dynamic element of volition that invariably plays its role, and feel the intractable tensions involved in rejecting the *Tao*. Sensitize rather than inure yourself to the dangers of dehumanization, not to mention its long and tragic track record in history. Cultivate a profound sense of intrinsic human value and relish the unspeakable, ineffable beauty of goodness that transcends words.

[1] Terence Cuneo, *The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

[2] Cuneo has written another book-length treatment titled *Speech and Morality* about a different argument for moral realism. Terence Cuneo, *Speech and Morality: On the Metaethical Implications of Speaking* (Oxford University Press, 2014). His argument hinges on the normative theory of speech, according to which speech acts come from an agent's altering his normative position with regard to his audience, thereby gaining rights, responsibilities, and obligations of certain kinds, some of which are moral. If so, a necessary condition of being able to speak is that there are moral rights, responsibilities, and obligations of a broadly realist sort. We leave further reflection on this innovative argument to the reader. Cuneo, Russ Shafer-Landau, and John Bengson are currently finishing a trilogy in which they argue for nonnatural moral realism following a careful methodological approach. We won't delve into it here, unable to do it justice, but the completed project is bound to be a major advance in the discussion. See John Bengson, Terence Cuneo, and Russ Shafer-Landau, *Philosophical Methodology: From Data to Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2022); and *The Moral University* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

[3] Thanks to Eric Sampson for offering this version of the argument. A number of his works have been of benefit to us, including Eric Sampson, "The Self-Undermining Arguments from Disagreement," *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 14, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford University Press, 2019), 23–46. See also "A Positive Case for Objective Morality (Dr. Eric Sampson)," interview by Jordan Hampton, posted February 25, 2021, by

The Analytic Christian, YouTube, 1 hour, 19 min., 2 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KICGOHpz7A.

4 A pro tanto moral principle is a moral principle that applies to a certain extent.

5 To see this argument fleshed out, see David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *The Good, the Right, and the Real: Is Value a Fact?* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

6 Natural law in the Thomistic tradition appeals to both Plato and Aristotle—both the notion of absolute good and what is good for something. The latter, to our thinking, is incomplete without being predicated on the former. As Steve Evans wrote in personal correspondence to us in January 2025,

> Many contemporary Thomists think we need only Aristotle. But Thomas Aquinas did not think that. He followed Augustine (and Plato) as well as Aristotle. Aristotle speaks of goodness as only goodness of a kind. Plato thinks that goodness is absolute. I think Christians should agree with Plato. We can agree with Aristotle that a thing can be a good thing of its kind. However, there is also goodness that is independent of a kind. It is good that humans exist. They have intrinsic value. Plato can make sense of that. Aristotle cannot. So I think Aristotelean views of value need to be rooted in a Platonic theory of value. I think that is Aquinas's view. So a good Thomist should also be a Platonist.

7 As Ward puts it, "Such lights bear witness to 'common grace' and therefore to the value of natural theology." See Michael Ward, *After Humanity: A Guide to C. S. Lewis's "The Abolition of Man"* (Word on Fire, 2021), 19.

8 This is clearly also in the tradition of John Henry Newman's construal of special revelation as performing an ampliative function after the provision of general revelation.

9 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: Or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (HarperOne, 2001), 18.

10 A properly basic belief is both noninferential and properly justified or warranted. "Phenomenal conservatism" is the view that if it seems to someone *S* that *p* is true, then *S* is prima facie justified in believing that *p*. Part 3 will discuss both of these more.

11 Ward, *After Humanity*, 14.

12 Lewis, *Abolition*, 24–25.

13 Horace's line was quoted in the title of a poem by Wilfred Owen called "Dulce et Decorum Est," published in 1921, describing soldiers' horrific experiences in World War I. Owen's poem, which calls Horace's line "the old Lie," ended the line's straightforward uncritical use. Some evidence suggests that Lewis never read Owen's poem. For interesting commentary here, see Malcolm Guite, "*The Abolition of Man*: From Literary Criticism to Prophetic Resistance," in *C. S. Lewis at Poets' Corner*, ed. Michael Ward and Peter S. Williams (Wipf & Stock, 2016), 161–63.

14 Lewis, *Abolition*, 26.

15 Ward, *After Humanity*, 16.

16 Lewis, *Abolition*, 81.

17 George Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Cornell University Press, 1986).

18 Thomas V. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 178.

19 The attribution to the natural world by some of qualities traditionally associated with God somewhat vindicates Berkeley's theologically driven concern.

20 Thus Moorean arguments.

21 Thanks to Clare MacCumhaill and Rachael Wiseman for their perspicacious book *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life* (Doubleday, 2022), xiii.

22 A book we just became aware of, too late to interact with, focuses on phenomenology and underscores limitations in a naturalistic perspective: Sharon Hewitt Rawlette's *The Feeling of Value: Moral Realism Grounded in Phenomenal Consciousness* (Dudley & White, 2016).

23 Knowing various true propositions about a person is not the same as knowing the person himself. See Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford University Press, 2012), for her distinction between Dominican and Franciscan knowledge.

24 MacCumhaill and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals*, xiv.

25 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 158.

[26] William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *Essays in Pragmatism* (Collier Macmillan, 1948), 103–4.

[27] This is not to suggest that moral dilemmas cannot in their own way serve a purpose and prove instructive, but perhaps they should not be the primary means of ethics instruction. See Christina Hoff Sommers, “How to Teach Right and Wrong,” *Christianity Today*, December 13, 1993, 33–37.

[28] See Twain’s preface to *Huckleberry Finn*.

[29] A. E. Taylor, *Faith of a Moralist* (Macmillan, 1930), 17.

[30] Hoff Sommers, “How to Teach Right and Wrong.”

[31] Flannery O’Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Short Stories* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1976), 204.

[32] Taylor, *Faith of a Moralist*, 16.

[33] MacCumhaill and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals*, ix.

PART 3

A Fivefold Moral Argument

Part 1 explored the history of the moral argument, especially in Western philosophy. On the shoulders of the luminaries discussed, and on the basis of the reasons to take moral realism seriously, which we discussed in part 2, we now, in brief compass, offer our own version of the moral argument. At numerous junctures it will resonate with aspects of that history we chronicled earlier. We will identify some of those points of overlap and will leave readers to take note of the rest.

Our case will be fivefold, covering five moral phenomena: essential human dignity and value; objective moral duties; moral knowledge; performative matters of morality encompassing forgiveness, change, and ultimate transformation; and an argument from rationality pertaining to the relationship between morality and something like flourishing. Our focus will mainly be on how each of these moral elements, whose reality we argued for in part 2, evidentially points to God. We will defer discussion of theism's main nonnatural rival—nontheistic moral Platonism—until part 4. The final chapter of this section of the book will put forth our fivefold argument in the form of a cumulative moral case for theism. At a few points we will suggest that it is arguable that the evidence points to something more fine-grained than generic theism. The conclusion will discuss an array of ways in which the argument can be couched, a relatively ancillary matter by comparison with the substantive content of the argument.

We take theism to involve God as classically construed in Anselmian fashion. For our purposes we don't make much of the distinction between classical theism narrowly understood and what some more recently have dubbed theistic personalism. Although our theological preferences are not wholly classical, this is not a debate that we are currently undertaking. Generally, we think of God as Anselmian primarily in the sense of instantiating the various great-making properties exemplified to the maximally compossible degree. Such "omni" qualities include omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, and the like. As Anselm was also a Christian, his construal of God was occasionally more fine-grained than that and more distinctively biblical. Our view is that the a priori conception of God as the greatest possible being is altogether consistent with the a posteriori biblical conception of God as found in Christian Scripture. Again, usually our argument will pertain to God understood in broader generic terms, Anselmian in the wider sense; whenever we might wish to argue for something more fine-grained, something distinctively Christian and Anselmian in the narrower sense, we will make that clear.

11

The Good

The first component of the cumulative moral argument we would like to construct pertains to the issue of value, or axiology, and this in two respects. First, we will briefly discuss objective moral values, especially the topic of moral goodness, and then spend the bulk of our time discussing a specific sort of value: distinctive human worth. Having argued for the thesis of moral realism earlier, here we will explore its evidential significance. When we speak of moral values, we are talking about whether something is good or bad in an ethical sense. To say that there are objective moral values is to say that something is good or bad, independently of whether any human being believes it to be so.

Objective Moral Values

Religious scholar and Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart has written that among the mind's transcendental aspirations, the longing for moral goodness is probably the most difficult to contain within the confines of a naturalist metaphysics.[1] Let's start with a few preliminary thoughts on this important topic of goodness and objective moral values. We all guide our lives, however inconsistently, by a certain set of values. But are the values we hold dear and guide our lives by mere social conventions akin to driving on the left- versus right-hand side of the road, perhaps instilled into us by evolution and social conditioning, or mere expressions of personal preference akin to having a taste for certain foods rather than others? Or are they valid independently of our apprehension of them, and if so, what is their foundation? Is there some standard determining good and evil that is

ultimate and absolute? To say that it is ultimate is to say that explanation stops with it, and to say that it is absolute is to say that its value is not merely relative to some other end.

The Good

The topic of objective moral values deserves a book-length treatment, so what we have to say here is largely meant as suggestive; our discussion of it is intentionally delimited, mainly designed to point readers to the magisterial work of Robert Adams, whose *Finite and Infinite Goods* offers a sustained philosophical case for taking God to be that foundation of objective moral values. Indeed, Adams argues that God himself *is* the ultimate good. We can't do his work justice in short compass, but we want to begin the discussion of goodness with him. Borrowing themes from Plato, Adams insists that it is natural for a theist to take God as best filling the role played by the Beautiful in the *Symposium* or the Good in the *Republic*. He takes intimations of an ultimate good or ultimate paradigm of beauty as veridical, akin to beatific visions of God among theists. It is in view of the similarity of these perceptions that he thinks it only natural that a theist would take God himself to be what we apprehend in those moments.

Adams argues that it makes best sense to think that God functions as the exemplar of goodness. On this understanding, God himself constitutes goodness in the sense of being its exemplar, perfect standard, ultimate paradigm, and final source. God need not be reconciled with an abstract conception of the good; since God is a person and, on this view, ultimate goodness itself, goodness is concrete, personalist, and relational.

When we apply the notion of goodness to situations, things, or states of affairs, we risk domesticating moral goodness, reducing it to a matter of producing pleasant consequences or avoiding harmful ones, without coming to terms with the fact that it's people and their decisions, wills, and characters that are, by turns, morally good, bad, or some admixture of the two. Pain, though unpleasant, isn't morally bad. Intentionally inflicting harmful and needless pain is a morally bad action, but note that it's the action of a person. When persons are seen as the appropriate subject of ascriptions such as "moral goodness" or "moral badness," the intriguing and

revelatory nature of such predicates can emerge. Otherwise, the result is typically domestication, and the evidential power of this dimension of morality is lost, narrowing the focus to material circumstances rather than allowing for talk of transcendence.

The role of our desires, on Adams's view, is to fix the reference of our value terminology to a property or object that has its own nature independent of our desires. He maintains that if there is indeed a single best candidate for the role of the good itself, or the property of goodness, there may certainly be some things that do not agree with it, and therefore fail to be good, even though virtually all of us may think they are good. But a property that belongs mainly to things that almost all of us think are bad, he insists, would certainly not fill the role picked out by our talk of goodness.

For Adams, whatever best fills the role of goodness is an object of admiration, desire, and recognition, at least commonly and to some degree. He insists that if we do not place some trust in our own recognition of the good, we will lose not only our grip on the concept of good but even our cognitive contact with the good itself. The thesis here that seems to Adams the most clearly correct is that to the extent that anything is good, in the sense of "excellent," it is good for us to love it, admire it, and want to be related to it, whether we are in fact or not. Adams attempts to persuade his readers that it is most plausible to take God as best filling this role, and heartily commends others to do the same. He then makes the claim, roughly following Plato, that the property of goodness consists in the relation of resemblance to the ultimate good. Finite goods are themselves good—that is, to whatever extent they measure up to the ultimate standard.

Thinking about some of the distinctive features of Plato's Form of the Good gives us more reason to think that God best satisfies such a description. The Good for Plato was no garden-variety Form but rather the one that had ontological primacy over all the others, the ultimate standard for all evaluations of the good. He likened it to the sun, and it is said to be the source of all that exists. The Form of the Good is self-predicating and is good itself; both the "is of identity" and the "is of predication" are operative, much as theists think of God himself as the ultimate source of and exemplar of the highest good. The affinities between the Platonic conception of the Good and God himself are so pervasive and striking at so many levels that it is hard to exaggerate.[2]

God as the ultimate paradigm of moral goodness has the additional advantage of not stopping explanation prematurely but of stopping only when we have reached the metaphysically ultimate being: a self-existent, metaphysically necessary being from whom all remaining reality derives and beyond which one cannot go. If there is an ultimate reality that is the proper stopping point, God is the least arbitrary solution. If we are to have an ultimate reality that lies behind all other explanations, it would be conceptually desirable if its nature had properties that make it sensible that it enjoy such a status. The greatest possible being, unlike a universe of matter/energy, arguably has within its conception resources for satisfying this constraint. We think it a mistake to call this ultimate reality a mere "brute fact," like Platonic truths existing apart from God, for reasons that we will explore in part 4.

According to classical theism, objective moral values are rooted in God. God's own holy and perfectly good nature supplies the absolute and ultimate standard against which all actions and decisions are measured. God's moral nature is what Plato called the "Good." He is the locus and source of moral value. He is the ultimate source of the Good; he is by nature loving, generous, just, faithful, kind, and so forth. "God is good" should be construed as both the "is of predication" and the "is of identity." A. C. Ewing once wrote that a being in whom the whole moral law resides could hardly fail to be perfectly good.[3]

As such, theism provides a sound foundation for the objectivity of moral values. On the theistic view, objective moral values are grounded in God. As Anselm saw, God is by definition the greatest possible being and therefore perfectly good. Indeed, he is not merely perfectly good; he is the paradigm of moral value. God's own holy and loving character supplies the absolute standard against which all things are measured. If God exists, moral values are objective, being wholly independent of human beings.

A Few Objections

Although Michael Huemer scorns the ontological argument predicated on Anselm's famous definition,[4] it is important to see that conceiving of God as the greatest possible being need not commit one to the cogency of the ontological argument. Norman Geisler taught that even if one does not

regard the ontological argument as a successful piece of natural theology, Anselm's argument can still be of tremendous value as a guide to a robust concept of God as a being that is metaphysically necessary, omnipotent, omniscient, and so on. Such a being serves as an explanatory stopping point that avoids various arbitrariness concerns.

Wesley Morriston finds it strange that the paradigm of moral goodness embodies a degree of love unattainable for us, and he suggests that it isn't in general true that the degree to which one possesses some property is measured by one's distance from an absolute maximum.[5] To the contrary, however, we should say that we want the ultimate or infinite good to embody absolute perfection—how could it be anything less? There is no problem in finite persons' possessing different degrees of goodness though all fall infinitely short of perfection. Analogously, every natural number falls infinitely short of the least transfinite cardinal $\aleph_0$, but they are nonetheless ordered by a *greater than* relation that facilitates comparison of their greatness.

Why, one might inquire, need there be some particular person who is maximally good in order for the rest of us to be even a little bit good? Could one not simply say that the addition of a maximally loving and just person to the world would not make the ordinary loves and just dealings of ordinary persons any better? This query is not, however, so much an objection to a paradigmatic conception of the good as it is a refusal of it. If God is the paradigm for moral goodness, he is the moral yardstick (or meter bar) that determines what little good we exhibit.[6] It is not as though there is some justice or goodness in the world that is improved by adding God; rather, the existence of such a paradigmatic good explains why there is justice and goodness in the world at all.

On our favored account, the reason something is good or bad is its degree of resemblance to God. For those who might like scientific analogies, consider the debate among palaeoanthropologists over what it is to be human. There is no consensus concerning necessary and sufficient conditions for classifying a hominin as human.[7] But if we take ourselves as paradigms of what it is to be human, then we can use the degree of resemblance to that paradigm as a way of speaking objectively of prehistoric human beings. A paradigmatic approach to moral values does

not preclude describing the paradigm as loving, generous, faithful, kind, and so forth, without thinking that those properties make the paradigm good.[8]

To wrap up this short section and anticipate another, it's worth noting that Adams provides a theistic Platonic account of the ultimate good, consistent with the notion of goodness as absolute. Some contemporary Thomists think we need only Aristotle's way of speaking of goodness as mere goodness of a kind. A good pen writes well, a good car transports us from one location to another well, and so on. We can and do agree with Aristotle that a thing can be a good thing of its kind, but there is also goodness that is independent of a kind. It is good that humans exist, for example. They have intrinsic value. We think that a Platonic conception of the good is better suited to explain this than an Aristotelean conception. So our view is that Aristotelean views of value need to be rooted in a Platonic theory of value. Indeed, Aquinas himself would agree, having tapped into ideas from both Aristotle and Plato. A good Thomist should in this sense also be a Platonist.[9] After a short additional reflection on God and goodness, we will turn to the matter of the intrinsic value of human beings, because it offers a particularly perspicacious variant of the moral argument.

Moral Apologetics

Divine Hiddenness

We want to interject at this juncture some additional thoughts about God and goodness that we think are centrally important to the task of moral apologetics.[10] The notion that there is a primordial good that somehow has primacy in the universe is, of course, a matter of some dispute. In fact, a careful investigation of a central religious disagreement between Kant and Hume centered on this very issue. Whereas Hume tended to focus on the evils of this world as evidence against such a notion, Kant retained a firm conviction in the priority and reality of moral goodness. The difference is a great one; for example, it led Hume to think the problem of evil rather intractable, contrary to Kant.

The problem of evil is likely the strongest reason to doubt God's goodness (or God's existence altogether). It, too, is a moral argument, a negative one. Its central idea is that the quality and quantity of the evil in the world (both natural and moral) render an Anselmian God's existence either unlikely or incoherent. The moral argument and the problem of evil are, in a real sense, locked in a zero-sum game; the success of either spells doom for the other.

Paul Moser makes an interesting point about the problem of divine hiddenness, which may well be a subset of the problem of evil. His point is generalizable and rife with epistemological implications, and it is this: Our inquiring into the question of God's existence is more than an intellectual quest. If God is essentially a being worthy of worship, because he is good, a function served by divine hiddenness may well be that it forces the hand of the seeker to inquire in the right spirit. Evidence we find for God must be fitting to God's character construed in such a way—a being worthy of worship (that is, essentially good). Speaking as Christians, we are convinced that nobody showed better what a being worthy of worship involves than Jesus did. Linda Zagzebski's work on moral exemplarism follows such a lead by encouraging moral apologists to zero in on compelling moral exemplars. The relevant evidence to consider should pertain to God's moral character and what that involves for us.

In this spirit, Moser thinks we should ask questions like this: Who am I as an inquirer about God asking for evidence for God's existence? What do we expect the evidence to be, and, importantly, what are we going to do with it? If it's just about becoming puffed up or accusing others of irrationality, we're not yet ready to receive the evidence, in which case a God worthy of the title will hide from us. Divine hiding is a theme rampant throughout the Bible. As Moser puts it, we shouldn't expect God to be trivially obvious.

As for where to look for the relevant evidence, he argues that it should be in the deepest center of human moral agency: the moral conscience. Our conscience challenges us to renounce selfishness and become oriented toward others. The place where God self-manifests and gives evidence of divine reality is in the conscience. Sounding a bit like John Henry Newman, Moser argues that the conscience is indicative of fundamental reality because of the way it works so concretely. To be a personal agent is to be an

intentional agent, setting goals and the like. The important question about conscience is whether its evidence indicates intentional agency.

Since conscience can lead people who are responsive to it away from selfishness and can deepen concern for others in a way that is purposive, he argues, there is reason to think it's deeply personal. We are moved less by abstract principles than by something intentional, something personal, an intrinsically morally perfect being worthy of worship. So the relevant evidence to consider is to be found in human moral experience where people are morally challenged in a way that's indicative of God's character, but there is a side of us that doesn't want to find the evidence, a point Pascal famously made many years ago. So what's required is moral candor and a willingness to comply.

In this way, epistemology becomes morally robust. Moser admits that secular ethical theories are possible, but he thinks they leave unanswered a central question of Plato's *Republic*—namely, Is the just life really worthwhile? Can it be sustained? Will there be ultimate justice and a balancing of the scales? In a purely secular universe the answer is likely no, Russell's dissembling transparent bravado in "A Free Man's Worship" notwithstanding.[11] Plato was asking whether the morally good life is sustainable, vindicatable, commendable—redolent with lasting meaning of the sort monotheists talk about.

The challenge, Moser argues, is whether we can be candid enough to leave room for such evidence—to give it honest attention, to be morally attentive and responsive. This is no time to be casual or sanguine; conscience constantly challenges us to be responsive to moral intrusion. Are we willing to go through a change of priorities? Moral phenomenology gives us the tools for a case for a personal and worship-worthy God at work speaking to us powerfully through our conscience, if we have but the ears to hear it.[12]

In apologetics we tend, understandably enough, to put the focus on truth. In classical thought, though, the so-called transcendentals included not just truth but also goodness, beauty, and unity. Goodness and beauty are of particular relevance at the moment. God's worship-worthiness is inextricably tied to his goodness, as we just discussed; and goodness and beauty are both ineliminably experiential. No moral argument is likely to be persuasive for someone who has not had visceral experiences of goodness

or good enough moral exemplars to emulate and admire, nor an aesthetic argument for someone lacking the requisite experiences of beauty.

The problem of evil is quite a large discussion, one we cannot pursue here due to space constraints. We have discussed it elsewhere, though, and included in the notes are some helpful references to navigate that difficult and challenging issue.[13] For now, we want to continue tracing out this line of thought of God as good (indeed, goodness itself). We submit that this makes moral apologetics, broadly construed, more than just an intellectual exercise, and it potentially involves a different avenue to discover the truth than discursive analysis alone, including elements deeply relational and experiential.

The Goodness of God

A central biblical motif is that God is good and we are and should be drawn to him for precisely that reason: *as* good, which fits the classical philosophical conception of goodness as essentially desirable. The worship pattern of the people of God in Scripture was consistently to face joys and challenges by focusing their attention on God's goodness, expressed in his steadfast love (*hesed*) toward them. "On this view," Horner says, "we as rational agents are drawn to what we take to be good, and, whether we are reflectively aware of it or not, we in fact order our lives in relation to what we conceive to be our ultimate good, our *summum bonum*. Such is the basic shape of moral psychology in the classical, especially the broadly Aristotelian, tradition."[14] According to Boethius, God is identical in his substance to true or supreme goodness, by which he rules all things. God's goodness is the "helm and rudder, so to speak, by which the fabric of the universe is kept constant and unimpaired."[15] The goodness of God is a central (perhaps the central) feature of Augustine's thought. Augustine endorses the classical moral psychology. Here the supreme good is sought, the good to which we refer everything that we do, desiring it not for the sake of something else but for its very own sake. Obtaining it, we require nothing further in order to be happy. It is truly called the "end," because we want everything else for the sake of this, but this we want only for itself.[16]

The highest good, Augustine argues, which everyone is ultimately seeking, is in fact God himself. Augustine's famous words at the beginning

of his *Confessions* should be understood in that light: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."[17] God is our good, the good we ultimately seek. In Thomas Aquinas, the classical understanding of good as desirable is at the heart of both his moral psychology and his metaphysical teleology. The "perfect good" toward which all human desires ultimately point, for Aquinas, even beyond the full realization of the specific potentialities of human nature, is God himself.[18]

Moreover, again, God as the locus of the good is worthy of worship. Horner writes, "Anselmian apologetics . . . follows the broader pattern of biblical examples of apologetics found, for example, in the Psalms—where psalmists, using vivid poetry (set to music), declare and describe God's manifold greatness (beauty, goodness, power, majesty, truth, etc.) as being supremely worthy of worship, and call the nations, on that basis, to respond with such worship. God is not just an inferred entity or the best explanation of certain phenomena, but the ultimate to-be-worshiped. This broader picture, it seems to me, should be reflected in our apologetics."[19]

Philosopher John Hare describes the phenomenology of a moral property as its having a kind of "call" on one—it elicits a response, obliges one, binds one, presses in on one, draws one.[20] Because of this affective aspect of morality, some philosophers have mistakenly inferred that moral judgments are "nothing but" expressions of desire or feelings or intentions, as we saw in part 2. But moral experience is more than merely cognitive—it's surely not less. It ought to involve engaging one's affections, desires, and will, procuring a "taste" for what is good. Horner argues compellingly that the project of moral apologetics should be full-orbed, holistic, and, most importantly, done in such a way to make goodness look attractive. Failure on this score is where Horner thinks that traditional moral arguments can fall short for many people: not as good philosophy but as fully persuasive apologetics, given current epistemic soil conditions. Horner's insights here resonate greatly with the wisdom of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.

Although we cannot do all of what Horner is suggesting here, that is a limitation of our own, not of the moral argument. We are, though, attempting to provide some of what he's getting at here by, say, considering the relevance of moral exemplars, embodied moral apologetics, nondiscursive analyses, and experiential dimensions of the moral life.

The Value, Dignity, and Rights of Persons

Human Dignity

Talk of value per se can seem a bit vague, recondite, and guilty of overreach, so an effective way to wrestle the discussion of value into something more manageable is to accentuate the value of persons. There is actually a cluster of closely related moral notions here of note—the moral value of persons, the dignity of people, essential human rights, and perhaps something like the essential equality of people.[21] Something that draws us to this strand of the moral argument is that it often speaks to people with whom we may not otherwise share a great deal of common ground. As such it is something we often may not have to argue for; it's something that many from a number of disparate worldview perspectives readily recognize and acknowledge. Not everyone, of course, but a great many. It is indeed telling that this particular piece of moral evidence is something that many of our unbelieving friends themselves intuitively recognize. At least at moments they are often able to see that people have great intrinsic value and dignity. They may not know why—just as they may not know why we have moral obligations, or that people are of equal moral worth, or that basic human rights obtain—but they can recognize the truths themselves. Otherwise, something like the moral argument could not get off the ground, because the moral argument appeals to just such moral evidences.

Human value and dignity are closely connected to the idea that we have basic human rights, not conferred on us by governments but in virtue of our humanness. It is often discussed in terms of the Kantian notion that we should treat people as ends in themselves and never merely as means. Speaking of Kant, he was careful to capture this idea of the incommensurable value of persons, contrasting human *dignity* with the notion of *price*. No amount of money can replace a person; we have value, indeed, something like infinite value. Kant, among others, was of the view that this is less a conclusion we draw than an inviolable deliverance of the moral law, something we start with.

Think about the Nazi depiction of Jews, the ugly history of American chattel slavery, or, more recently, the intellectual contortions required to deny the humanity of unborn children to justify their convenient

elimination. In such paradigmatic instances of reprehensible mistreatment, we see on ready display the perceived need to deny the humanity of the victims. This is thought to make it okay; we would otherwise have to come to terms with the behavior residing beyond the moral pale. Even at our worst, we somehow recognize the value of humans and seek to rationalize our behavior when we deny the humanity of the victims—just as Goebbels's propaganda did regarding the Poles. We suspect general revelation alone gives us reason to think human beings are intrinsically valuable, sacred, and the legitimate bearers of human rights. Such recognitions should then lead us to ask what it is about reality that explains such truths. Why is it that people have such great intrinsic dig-nity and value?

Now, its very obviousness might be thought to imply that we need not search for a more ultimate explanation. If it's that obvious, why ask why? But this is to confuse the matter of the truth of something with our knowing it to be true. We may be able to recognize that something is true without being able to explain why. This is the aforementioned difference between something being *self-evident* and something being *self-explaining*. Another way to put it is that it is confusing metaphysics (what is real) with epistemology (our knowledge of what's real). Even unbelievers can often grasp that people have mysteriously great intrinsic value, but they simply don't have the metaphysical resources to make good sense of it. Human value is a piece of moral evidence that veritably cries out for adequate explanation.

The question to ask is what features of the world explain this notably high intrinsic value we intuitively recognize that human beings possess. Value often gets tied to dignity; Kant himself did this, linking dignity with respecting the autonomy of others. Others, like Mark Linville, associate basic human dignity with people being the legitimate bearers of basic human rights. Women have the right not to be raped; children have the right not to be burned alive for the entertainment of the rich. Where do such rights come from? Among the "natural signs" adduced by Evans is human dignity and worth. Evans agrees with Nicholas Wolterstorff that belief in the value of human beings undergirds the conviction that we possess "natural rights" as humans.[22] Such rights arguably hold prior to any governmental conferrals of rights. They are moral rights, not merely legal

ones; the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. highlights some of the organic connections between those two types of rights.

Now, historically speaking, religious perspectives have often bolstered convictions about basic human rights. Some even argue that they are a product of Judaism and Christianity, both of which claim that human beings are not only creatures of God but made in the image of God. Grounding human rights in capacities like the power of reason isn't workable, since many who have such rights lack such capacities. "Infants, those with Alzheimer's, and those born with severe mental impairments lack any such rational powers," Evans writes, "but they surely still have whatever inherent dignity and worth belongs to humans as humans."[23] Even historically what we find is that seeing the value of disabled children, or the mentally ill, or the desperate refugee was often tied to the Judeo-Christian ethic and its influence.

To be clear, it is the metaphysics here that matter the most. It is not *belief* in God that's either necessary or sufficient to sustain human dignity. It is a theistic worldview that is better able, ontologically speaking, to explain intrinsic human dignity in a requisitely deep way. It is incumbent on a worldview to explain what does and does not exist in a way that follows naturally from the central explanatory commitments of that worldview.[24] Why treat others as ends in themselves? Why think people have intrinsic dignity and value and worth? As Linville argues, no merely secular variant of normative or substantive ethical theory—egoism, utilitarianism, or virtue theory—contains resources sufficient to explain the moral regard for persons we should have.[25] Our having been made in God's image, however, provides a robust explanation of why we are here, why we possess the value we do, and why persons should be treated as ends in themselves and never merely as means.

Loving Our Neighbor

Austin Farrer, recall, had for one of his main points of emphasis the value of persons. In his book *Reflective Faith*, he asked readers to consider the way we normatively ought to think about other people. It is of great importance, he argued, that we value them rightly, that we think about others in such a way as to regard them properly. The only limitations that

such deep regard for others should encounter are those that cannot be avoided—namely, those "set by the conditions of our life," as he put it.[26] Such regard should be at once so pure and so entire that it leads to a sort of frustration that comes from the incompleteness of our definition of those we so regard. Thinking of our neighbors in too garden-variety a way can't sustain the esteem we intuitively think they deserve. The conclusion to which Farrer felt compelled is that what deserves our regard is not simply our neighbor but God in our neighbor and our neighbor in God.

The most important command we have been given is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and then, intimately tied to that, our neighbor as ourselves. Learning to love our neighbor involves nothing less than learning to see God in our neighbor and our neighbor in God. Every person we encounter is someone for whom Jesus died. A low view of other people is often caused by a low view of God. Fred ("Mister") Rogers held a high view of God and a corresponding high view of people. In fact, he liked to say that, frankly, there isn't anyone you couldn't learn to love once you've heard their story.[27] We are all made in God's image, but each one of us is also unique, so Rogers would have also liked Marilynne Robinson's words: "Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it."[28]

Allow us to add another word about Fred Rogers. We observed an interesting phenomenon some years ago when a documentary came out about Mister Rogers and the gentle life of service he led. At the documentary's conclusion, grown men could be seen weeping as they left the theater. There is something unavoidably touching about this man's sacrificial love for his neighbors and earnest investment in the lives of the most vulnerable. We submit that, in a real sense, Rogers's very life constituted a moral apologetic, but because it was the embodiment of the principles we are discussing philosophically, people's defenses are often down and, in those moments of seeing it, they allow themselves to feel the force of it rather than to put up their intellectual defenses. We encourage you not to see this discussion merely as an intellectual exercise; what is at stake here is too high, and the price of denying what we can't not know is simply too steep. Rogers agreed that all of us are divine image bearers and, as a result, have tremendous value as people, such that a special holiness accompanies every one of our normal daily interactions. As C. S. Lewis put

it, “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”[29]

In his 1940 novel *The Power and the Glory*, a hauntingly beautiful story of a disgraced priest, Graham Greene charged his readers to recognize and respond rightly to this intrinsic value: “When you visualized a man or woman carefully, you could always begin to feel pity—that was a quality God’s image carried with it. When you saw the lines at the corners of the eyes, the shape of the mouth, how the hair grew, it was impossible to hate. Hate was just a failure of imagination.”[30] As a quick aside, the face appears particularly important to our identity and personhood somehow. We can’t see the face of God and live, the Bible tells us. Lewis recognized the maturation of our selves and the formation of our faces in titling his greatest novel *Till We Have Faces*. Moreover, in more than one language, the word for personality is etymologically tied to the face. There is something ineliminably personalist about the face. It’s far easier to be cruel to those who remain faceless; this is likely why online activity can so often be acidulous, dehumanizing, and vitriolic.

This is one of those places we are inclined to think the moral argument points to something more fine-grained than a generically Anselmian God broadly understood. Such a notion as our having been made in God’s image goes beyond Anselmianism in the broad sense. To say God possesses the “omni” qualities does not entail that God made us in his image. This piece of teaching we get from revelation, but it is what enables us to posit that theism grounds the exalted nature of persons. According to this view, held in common by the three great monotheistic traditions, God is personal and is the source of all value. The value of personhood is found in the fact that the metaphysically, axiologically, and explanatorily ultimate Being is personal.[31]

To love one’s neighbor as oneself, as the Bible enjoins, is not to conjure artificial warm sentiments toward them. It is rather to recognize their intrinsic worth and dignity and honor that obtain irrespective of whether there is reciprocation—not just in their general humanness but in their true uniqueness. This makes insightful indeed the recognition that we have been

endowed by our Creator with certain inviolable human rights. To have been made in God's image, created for a reason and purpose and imbued with inalienable rights, and to be loved infinitely by him: This is the deepest source and excellent explanation on offer of human dignity and value.

Indeed, on the Christian story, an account of goodness rooted in God must emphasize not just what good things humans share in common but the distinctive ways they are different, for in our very differences are reflections of disparate aspects of God. A theistic and Christian picture of the human condition provides a compelling account of human dignity, of incommensurable worth, not just for humanity as a whole but for each and every individual. This is an account strong enough to sustain our deepest intuitions about the inestimable value of each and every human person.

None of this is to deny that there is an ultimate accounting for our actions and, owing to those actions, for our habits and character. Our intrinsic value does not entail intrinsic moral goodness. A later chapter will take up this issue, but for now it is worth mentioning that the horrific possibility exists that some people may eventually become truly despicable, making it hard to see them as bearing God's image and deserving or prompting love. Scripture teaches that all of us fall short of God's glory and need God's grace, but if God's overtures of love are ultimately rejected and resisted altogether, the result is a fearful destiny indeed. In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis intimated at such a fate when he wrote that hell begins with a grumbling mood, but there might come a day when one no longer can resist it; at that point, there's little to no you left to criticize the mood or even enjoy it, just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine.[32] In each of us there's something growing that will *be* hell unless it is nipped in the bud.

[1] David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (Yale University Press, 2013), 251.

[2] See Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999), part 1.

[3] A. C. Ewing, *Value and Reality: The Philosophical Case for Theism* (George Allen & Unwin, 1973), 199.

[4] Huemer's brief discussion of the ontological argument is out of date. It is false that the ontological argument claims that "God exists" is an analytic truth. No existential assertion is analytic, and so construing it would make it impossible to assert that God really does exist. By the same token, current versions of the ontological argument (like Plantinga's) do not try to define God into existence but are modal arguments asserting that it is possible that God exists, from which metaphysical possibility it follows that God does exist. So the old claim that the ontological argument proves only that if there is a God, then God exists necessarily, fails to take cognizance of the modal versions. One might think Huemer's inadequate grasp of the ontological argument something of a side issue, to be graciously overlooked, but this deficit looms surprisingly large, we think, in his rejection of grounding moral values in God.

[5] Wesley Morriston, "Does Morality Have a Theological Foundation?," in *A Debate on God and Morality: What Is the Best Account of Objective Moral Values and Duties?*, ed. Adam Lloyd Johnson (Routledge, 2021), 127.

[6] Although Morriston notes some disanalogies between God and other paradigms—such as the contingency of the meter bar's setting the standard or the ease of something's being a meter in length or the public accessibility of the paradigmatic standard—he does not press these, since "these analogies are meant only to provide examples of cases in which a familiar property . . . can plausibly be identified with resemblance in a certain respect . . . to a single [paradigmatic] standard" ("Theological Foundation?," 9–10).

[7] See Ian Tattersall, "The Genus *Homo*," *Inference* 2, no. 1 (February 2016), http://inference-review.com/article/the-genus-homo.

[8] For a fuller treatment of God as the ultimate good, see the chapter on goodness in David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls's *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

[9] Thanks to Steve Evans for this insight.

[10] We take much of our inspiration for this section from a remarkable talk that our friend and colleague David Horner gave some years ago. See "Too Good Not to Be True: The Shape of Moral Apologetics," posted April 9,

2015, by FOCLOnline, YouTube, 1 hour, 12 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBSK4Hw1XoY. We urge readers to listen to his rich presentation.

11 In *Mysticism and Logic, and Other Essays* (Allen & Unwin, 1917).

12 Frederick Choo, "Chapter 5 of God and Cosmos, 'Moral Obligations.' (Part 1)," Moral Apologetics, March 15, 2017, https://www.moralapologetics.com/wordpress/chapter-5-of-god-and-cosmos-moral-obligations.

13 See chap. 8 and appendix B in Baggett and Walls, *Good God*, and see Paul Copan's chapter on the problem of evil and the moral argument in the forthcoming Oxford University Press collection edited by Baggett and Hare. A specific instance of the problem of evil is the conquest narratives of the Old Testament (among other issues connected to biblical stories that seem prima facie hard to square with widespread moral intuitions). See Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Baker Books, 2011); *Is God a Vindictive Bully? Reconciling Portrayals of God in the Old and New Testaments* (Baker Academic, 2022); and with Matthew Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Baker Books, 2014).

14 Horner, "Too Good Not to Be True."

15 *Consolation of Philosophy* 3.12. Quoted from Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. V. E. Watts (Penguin Books, 1969), 115.

16 *City of God*, 8.8. Quoted from Augustine, *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael W. Tkacz and Douglas Kries (Hackett, 1994), 63–64.

17 Quoted from Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991), book 1, chap. 1.

18 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Christian Classics, 1981), I-II.1.6c, I-II.4.7 ad. 2, I-II.5.4c.

19 Horner, "Too Good Not to Be True."

20 John Hare, *God's Call: Moral Realism, God's Commands, and Human Autonomy* (Eerdmans, 2001). Unlike his father, Hare conjoined prescriptivity with objectivity, as a believer that there indeed *are* moral facts.

21 Something at least in the vicinity of animal rights could also be discussed here. Presumably their possession of rights is not a function of

their having been created in God's image, but a compelling case could still be made that there are some treatments of these sentient creatures that are beyond the moral pale. Theism can make excellent sense of this, although we won't pursue that line of argument here.

22 See Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, for example. Mark Linville's twofold moral argument can be found in "The Moral Argument," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Blackwell, 2009), 391–448. C. Stephen Evans's *Natural Signs and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford University Press, 2010) lays out his distinctive approach rooted in Reformed epistemology. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 316–19, and his *Understanding Liberal Democracy: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2012). See also his "Would You Stomp on a Picture of Your Mother? Would You Kiss an Icon?," *Faith and Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2015): 3–24.

23 C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and the Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 138–39.

24 J. P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism* (SCM, 2009), 3.

25 See Linville, "The Moral Argument."

26 Austin Farrer, *Reflective Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Charles C. Conti (Wipf & Stock, 2012). See in particular the chapter "A Moral Argument for the Existence of God."

27 See this useful biography of Rogers: Maxwell King, *The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers* (Abrams, 2018).

28 Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004), 66.

29 C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (HarperOne, 2001), 45–46.

30 Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (Penguin, 1940), 131.

31 See Mark Linville's "The Moral Argument," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Blackwell, 2009), 391–448.

32 In *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (HarperOne, 2002), 507.

12

The Right

Another variant of the moral argument posits that moral duties are plausibly seen as rooted in God.[1] Alvin Plantinga is on record saying that this version of the moral argument is the one he considers the best argument for God's existence, excepting a cumulative case approach.[2] This is a metaethical claim about moral ontology, not about moral linguistics or epistemology. It is fundamentally a claim about the objectivity of moral properties, not a claim about the meaning of moral sentences or about the justification or knowledge of moral principles. Part 2 of this book argued for taking such duties seriously and left open the possibility that God may well provide their needed explanation.

Categorical Imperatives

Objections to the effect that we can understand the meaning of statements like "Torture of political prisoners is wrong" without reference to God are quite beside the point. Similarly, when it is said that the statement "God is good" becomes trivial on theistic metaethics, this objection misconstrues the theistic position as a meaning-claim. A statement like "God is good" may be taken as a synthetic statement expressing a proposition that is metaphysically necessary both in the sense that the proposition is true in all possible worlds and in the sense that goodness is an essential property of God. Or again, the theist will agree, and even insist, that we do not need to know or even believe that God exists in order to discern objective moral values or to recognize our moral duties.

In terms of the logical structure of a moral argument, the premise tying together God and moral duties might be expressed in deductive, abductive, or inductive terms. We will discuss that issue later on; here we wish to explore positive reasons to think that moral duties may well importantly depend on God, in one way or another. The previous chapter dealt with moral values, issues of good and bad; here our focus is on moral duties, the matter of whether something is morally right or wrong. Obviously, one is not morally obligated to do something just because it would be good for one to do it. For example, it's a good thing for one to become a chemist, but that doesn't imply that it is therefore one's duty to become a chemist. For it is also good to become a firefighter or a diplomat or a doctor, and one cannot do them all. Moreover, there are occasionally circumstances in which one, tragically, is confronted with nothing but bad choices (think of *Sophie's Choice*), but it is not therefore wrong of one to choose one of the options, since one must choose. So there is a conceptual difference between something's being good (or bad) and something's being right (or wrong). The former has to do with the matter of moral worth, while the latter concerns the issue of moral obligatoriness.

Some theorists attempt to circumvent the need for moral duties in their ethical system because they think it's adequate to talk about the need and role for moral virtues. Our lives often go better with moral virtues than without them, it's true. There's much about virtue theory we like; cultivating strength of character is among the important results of an ethical life. We don't, however, see this as in competition or tension with a judicious emphasis on moral duties. Presumably the reasons we should become people of virtue are stronger than merely the advantages and benefits we get from it. The moral law is less contingent and more binding and categorical than that. Virtue ethics doesn't rid us of the need for moral obligations but rather makes best sense only if moral duties are real.

It's easy to explain moral obligations if by "obligations" we simply mean *feelings of obligation*, but the latter are neither necessary nor sufficient for the former. Perhaps someone neglects a particular duty for so long that he has ceased to feel it to be a duty anymore. Conversely, one can have the feeling one ought to do something yet have no obligation to do it at all; consider, for example, Huckleberry Finn's conviction that he should turn in

his friend Jim, the runaway slave. Usually, though, feelings of obligation at least roughly correspond to actual obligations.

Moral obligations are not just rules or mere suggestions; they are not mere options for us, even options supported by good reasons. They are thought to be *inescapable*. Another word for "duty" or "obligation" is *imperative*. Immanuel Kant was well known for distinguishing between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. *Hypothetical imperatives* depend for their legitimacy on some goal desired by the subject of the prescription. For example, to lose weight you ought to eat less or differently and/or exercise more. The hypothetical prescription to eat less isn't universally applicable, obviously enough. A *categorical imperative*, though, on a Kantian construal, is universally applicable, not dependent at all for its legitimacy on any goal desired by the subject of the prescription. To treat others as ends in themselves and not merely as means, to use Kant's famous example, is a categorical imperative, something everyone has a moral duty to do. It should be obvious that categorical imperatives are organically connected to our earlier discussions of objective prescriptivity, normativity, and the like.

Moral obligations understood as categorical imperatives require more than inescapability. They need an additional vital ingredient, which Richard Joyce characterizes as *authority*. He notes that this gives us a normative system enjoying both features, inescapability and authority, one that possesses "practical clout."[3] Such practical clout dictates that the obligatory is what we have to do, what we must do—not in the sense of the *causal* must but of the *moral* must. When C. S. Lewis speaks of the moral demand at the beginning of *Mere Christianity*, he refers to it as a "law" but distinguishes it from the laws governing the operation of the physical world in just this sense.[4] We can't opt out from being governed by gravity. We can, however, choose to ignore the moral law, often to our peril and chagrin, and too often we do.

To say that we have objective moral duties is to say that certain actions are right or wrong for us independently of whether any human being believes them to be so. For example, to say that the Holocaust was objectively wrong is to say that it was wrong even though the Nazis who carried it out thought that it was right, and it would still be wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in exterminating or

brainwashing everybody who disagreed with them so that it was universally believed that the Holocaust was right.

Matthew Jordan lists the following properties, revealed by an examination of our moral experience, which must characterize any adequate theory of moral duty:

> *Objectivity:* The truth of a moral proposition is independent of the beliefs of any particular human being or human community.
>
> *Normativity:* Moral considerations, as such, constitute reasons for acting.
>
> *Categoricity:* Moral reasons are reasons for all human persons, regardless of what goals or desires they may have.
>
> *Authority:* Moral reasons are especially weighty reasons.
>
> *Knowability:* In normal circumstances, adult human beings have epistemic access to morally salient considerations.
>
> *Unity* (Individuality): A human person can have a moral reason to act or to refrain from acting in ways that affect no one other than the agent who performs the act.[5]

Any theory that fails to have these properties will not be an adequate theory of moral duty.

Divine Command Theory

A divine command theory (DCT) of ethics, such as has been articulated by Robert Adams, Philip Quinn, William Alston, C. Stephen Evans, and others, seems to have these properties.[6] One need not be a divine command theorist to feel the force of the moral argument(s) for God's existence, but we are drawn to DCT as a quite plausible theory. The genius of this theory is that it provides a plausible grounding for objective moral duties. Predicated on a theory of the good, our moral duties are in turn grounded in God's commands, which must be consistent with God's nature. On an Anselmian view, God's nature is without defect, either metaphysical or moral. Obligations arise as a result of imperatives issued by a competent authority. To illustrate, if some random person were to tell us to pull our car over, we would have absolutely no legal obligation to do so. But if a

policeman were to issue such a command, we would have a legal obligation to obey. The difference in the two cases lies in the authority of the persons who issued the commands: One is qualified to do so, while the other is not.

Similarly, moral obligations arise as a result of imperatives issued by a competent authority. And in virtue of God's nature, God is uniquely qualified to issue such commands as expressions of his nature. God's moral nature is expressed in relation to us in the form of divine commands that constitute our moral duties or obligations.[7] Far from being arbitrary, these commands reflect his moral nature. They are objective, normative, categorical, authoritative, and individual. Moreover, God reveals his moral will to mankind both in conscience and in Scripture so that our duties are to some extent knowable. On this foundation we can affirm the objective rightness of love, generosity, self-sacrifice, and equality while we also condemn as objectively wrong selfishness, hatred, abuse, discrimination, and oppression.

Before moving on, it is important that we remain clear in understanding the issue before us. The question is *not,* Must we believe in God in order to live moral lives? There is no reason to think that atheists and theists alike may not live what we normally characterize as good and decent lives. Similarly, the question is *not,* Can we formulate a system of ethics without reference to God? If the nontheist grants that human beings do have objective value and duties, then there is no reason to think that he cannot work out a system of ethics with which the theist would also largely agree. Or again, the question is *not,* Can we recognize the existence of objective moral values and duties without reference to God? The theist will typically maintain that a person need not believe in God in order to recognize, say, that we should love our children.

All of the above misunderstandings of the argument are based on confusing God's existence with *belief* in God's existence. The argument is not that *belief* in God's existence generates the objective reality of moral values and duties but rather that God himself is plausibly thought to be the ground for the objective reality of moral values and duties. Nor is the argument that God is necessary as our source of moral knowledge; the next chapter will take up moral epistemology. All too common is the confusion of moral ontology with moral epistemology on the part of certain moral

philosophers.[8] Moral ontology deals with the *reality* of moral values; moral epistemology deals with our *knowledge* of moral truths.

As far as moral epistemology is concerned, we can appeal to all the same mechanisms as do secularists, such as moral intuition and reflection, by means of which humanist thinkers are confident that they accurately discern the good and the right. In fact, the Bible actually teaches that God's moral law is "written on [the] hearts" of all men, so that even those who do not know God's law "do by nature things required by the law, . . . their consciences also bearing witness" to them (Rom. 2:14–15). If that is the case, a theist's moral epistemology need not differ broadly from the humanist's own moral epistemology. Epistemological objections are thus red herrings that need not detain us. As Kurtz puts it, "The central question about moral and ethical principles concerns this ontological foundation. If they are neither derived from God nor anchored in some transcendent ground, are they purely ephemeral?"[9]

What are other reasons to think that God functions at the foundation of moral duties? We have explored this question elsewhere, but here we point to two more reasons. C. Stephen Evans suggests two advantages of DCT.[10] First, it gives a satisfying explanation of the role played in morality by accountability. Earlier we mentioned the social dimension of moral obligations, and morality is often tied to the issue of being accountable, but to whom? Are we accountable merely to other human beings, as Darwall insists? Evans points out a dilemma if this is so. Are we accountable to actual humans or to some ideal, hypothetical community? The former doesn't seem right, because humans make demands that conflict with morality. It seems that we should honor only those demands that are morally appropriate. This might lead one to appeal to one's "moral community" or its representatives, which sounds like a hypothetical, idealized group, not an actual group. But how can actual demands be made by a nonexistent group? (We saw this problem arise earlier for ideal observer theories.) Why care about the judgments made by a nonexistent being? If, however, the demands of morality are those made by God, they are actual claims.

Second, DCT enhances the prospects for forgiveness, an important desideratum given the moral shortcoming of humans. It is obvious that most of us humans have moral failings. We need forgiveness. The benefits of

giving and receiving forgiveness have been empirically verified. Sometimes we can receive forgiveness from other humans for the wrongs we have done, but not always. They may be deceased or simply unwilling to forgive. But if all sins are sins against God, then God can forgive all sins. This insight will serve us well when we get to the performative variant of the moral argument in a few chapters.

Some Objections

At this point it's important to consider some objections to DCT. The objections to be considered are far from an exhaustive list. For more consideration of other objections to DCT, from autonomy to psychopathy to more besides, see the chapter on obligations in *Good God* and some other sources adduced in the footnotes.[11]

Euthyphro

Despite the strengths of DCT, it is a common target of critics. Ever since Plato, the claim that moral truths are founded in God has been criticized as problematic. In his dialogue *Euthyphro*, Plato posed his famous dilemma according to which, it seems, God's commands are arbitrary or irrelevant to what's morally true. However, the dilemma allegedly forced on us is a false one, and we may escape the horns of the dilemma by finding a third alternative. We think that an appropriately formulated divine command theory of moral obligations supplies such an alternative: Our moral duties are constituted by the commands of an essentially just and loving God. The morally good/bad is determined by reference to God's nature; the morally right/wrong is determined by reference to his will. For any action *A* and moral agent *S*, we can explicate the notions of moral requirement, prohibition, and permission of *A* for *S* as follows:

A is *required* of *S* if and only if a just and loving God commands *S* to do *A*.

A is *forbidden* to *S* if and only if a just and loving God commands *S* not to do *A*.

A is *permitted* for *S* if and only if a just and loving God does not command *S* not to do *A*.

Since our moral duties are grounded in the divine commands, they are not independent of God, nor, plausibly, is God bound by moral duties, since he presumably does not issue commands to himself. Since Kant, it has also been common to think that God does not have moral duties because of his inability to have failed to discharge them if he did. Tom Morris once put it like this: Even though God has no moral obligations, his behavior is "functionally isomorphic" with a being who perfectly discharges whatever duties he has. Of course, the behavior of a maximally loving being is far from explicable in terms of duty fulfillment alone.

If God does not fulfill moral duties, then what content can be given to the claim that he is good? Here Kant's distinction between *following a rule* and acting *in accordance with a rule* has proved helpful. God may act naturally in ways that for us would be rule-following and so constitutive of goodness in the sense of fulfilling our moral duties, so that God can be said similarly to be good in an analogical way. This fact also supplies the key to the arbitrariness objection. For our duties are determined by the commands not merely of a supreme potentate but also of a just and loving God. God is essentially compassionate, fair, kind, impartial, and so forth, and his commandments are reflections of his own character. Note that this analysis does not necessitate cashing out God's love in only analogical ways.

On this analysis, God's commands are not arbitrary, and we need not trouble ourselves about counterfactuals with impossible antecedents like "If God were to command child abuse . . ." On the customary semantics, counterfactuals with impossible antecedents have no nonvacuous truth value. Even if we reject the customary semantics and allow that some counterfactuals with impossible antecedents may be nonvacuously true or false, how are we to assess the truth value of a statement with an antecedent like this? It is like wondering whether, if there were a round square, its area would equal the square of one of its sides. And what would it matter how one answered, since what is imagined is logically incoherent? We do not see that the divine command theorist is committed to the nonvacuous truth of the counterfactual in question or that anything of significance hangs on one's thinking it to be nonvacuously true or false.

God may be said to be good in the sense that he possesses unsurpassable moral virtue—and he does so essentially. God's axiological perfection should be understood not in terms of duty-fulfillment but in terms of virtue. This conception helps us to understand the sense in which God is to be praised: not in the sense of commendation for fully executing his duties or even for his acts of supererogation but rather in the sense of adoration for his axiological perfection, great grace, and unsurpassable love. Unless we are nihilists, we have to recognize some ultimate standard of value, and God is the least arbitrary stopping point. The Euthyphro objection therefore fails to undermine theistic-based metaethics.[12]

A Problematic Disjunction

Another common sort of objection is often raised against DCT. Russ Shafer-Landau sees divine command theorists saddled with a dilemma: Either God does not have reasons for his commands or he does. If God does not have reasons, then morality on DCT is entirely a function of divine command, rendering morality whatever he wills it to be, which is to say it is altogether arbitrary. On the other hand, if God were to have reasons for his commands, then those reasons, rather than God's commands, would be why we have the obligations we do. So morality is either arbitrary or it is not the divine commands that are the real reasons for the obligations.

Does God always have reasons for the commands he issues? As Shafer-Landau puts it, either he does or he does not. First, suppose that he does. This raises a different question: Could God, at least on occasion, have issued a different command, even if he did have reasons for the command he in fact issued? Another way of putting this question is to ask whether any of God's commands are contingent. If some particular commands were contingent and could have been otherwise, would the result be problematic arbitrariness? If God had told the Israelites, for example, to torture children for fun, that would be good evidence not to look in the direction of the Torah for moral guidance or to God as a moral foundation. But is it always the case that God's commands could not have been different? There are two questions here: Is it possible that some of God's commands are contingent in light of the fact that he has reasons for his commands, and would a different command be morally problematic?

To address the first question—might some of God's commands be contingent in light of the fact that he has reasons for them?—consider an analogy, and here we intend to employ the notion of libertarian agency. Imagine for the moment that human beings possess libertarian freedom such that, when confronted with choices of various sorts, we genuinely have alternative possibilities. Let us choose a garden-variety example of coming along an intersection while out for a drive. Suppose we have two choices: turning left or turning right. Either way might get us to our destination, and what goes into our decision could be any number of factors—the most economical route, a desire to take the more scenic path, traffic considerations, a desire to break up routine, and so forth. Now suppose that the two options are almost identically attractive, such that it becomes a genuinely difficult choice between them. In such a case, whichever way we choose to go, in retrospect we could give reasons for the choice. But on the reasonable hypothesis that we could have genuinely chosen either path, the reasons we might adduce in retrospect did not entail the particular choice.

Might God at least on occasion find himself in a similar situation in which he may well issue a command, and have reasons for his command, but the choice remains a contingent one? On such an account, he may well have issued a different command, and done so for various reasons, but again without those reasons entailing the command in question. Even if human beings do not have libertarian freedom, all that is required to entertain such a hypothesis is that God possesses it. It is intuitive to think, if God is the creator of the universe, that he had the choice either to create or not to create; if that is right, then it is reasonable to suppose he has substantive agency involving alternative possibilities.

So our tentative conclusion is that even if God's commands are always done for reasons, it is not the case that the commands in question, and the resultant duties, are always entailed by those reasons, contra Shafer-Landau. This could well mean that, with respect to at least some of God's commands, he retained the prerogative to give a different command instead. Scotus, of course, is well known for arguing this was so regarding the second tablet of the Decalogue. As to which commands might be contingent, that is a matter pertaining to the second question mentioned above—whether the alternative command is morally problematic. Again, when an alternative command is morally problematic—like a command to

torture kids for fun—either such a thing is possible or it is not (based on, say, God's essential character). If it is possible, the resulting variant of voluntarism is susceptible to an intractable arbitrariness problem; this is why rejecting pure voluntarism is eminently rational. If it is not possible for God to issue such a command, however, the version of voluntarism that remains does not fall prey to problematic arbitrariness. That there are such gradations of voluntarism is no part of Shafer-Landau's discussion. Both Adams and Evans predicate their variants of DCT on built-in constraints to circumvent arbitrariness concerns.

Helpful in this regard is a distinction that Evans emphasizes between a modal status aspect of DCT and what he dubs the "discretionary hypothesis." Evans thinks the former essential to DCT; the latter not so much. The former emphasizes the distinctive authority that God has to issue commands, an issue to which we will return in a moment. The latter is that even though God's commands are constrained by what is good, he still has some choice with respect to some of the commands. The denial of the discretionary hypothesis is that God's commands are fixed by his knowledge of what is good. This does not mean that all of God's commands are necessary; some could be fixed because what is commanded is necessarily good and no alternative could be good. Scotus gives the command to love God as an example. But Evans emphasizes that some of the commands could be fixed by God's knowledge of what is good in a particular world, given his choices about what kind of world to make. On this view, once God decides what world to create, he also knows what commands he will give in that world. However, this does not mean all the commands are necessary. Some could be contingent because God could have chosen to create a different world. Suppose God creates a world with only immortal creatures who cannot die, for example. In that world, he would not give the command not to murder, because it would not be possible to murder anyone. So commands can be fixed without being necessary. On Evans's view, Aquinas holds this kind of divine command view. The natural law is fixed by God's eternal law and God's knowledge of the world he has created.[13]

Let's turn now to this recurring and central issue of authority.

Prior Obligations Objection

On this central matter of moral authority, DCT does need to offer some account of why we ought to obey God. Sometimes this is called the "prior obligations objection," advanced by Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688) and others. Impetus for the objection comes from asking why one has an obligation to obey God's commands. Presumably it needs to be more than a prudential reason, a matter of covering one's cosmic rear end to avoid getting flames on it. Nor is it a matter of whether we have good reasons to obey God. If God exists, loves us, and knows what is best for us, then it's plausible to think that obeying him is a good idea. The real question is whether God has the requisite authority to issue commands that constitute moral obligations. If our duties come from God's commands, where does the duty come from to obey God's commands? To say the duty to obey God comes from God's command seems problematically circular.

Even if God does issue such a command, why are we obliged to obey it? In his book on divine command theory, Evans tries his hand at offering several responses to this question. More recently he has emphasized that the duty to obey God is simply part of DCT and that there is no real objection here. What Evans and other divine command theorists concede, though, is that DCT rests on some account of the good and divine authority. Here there are several possibilities from the history of philosophy, several of which may contain a kernel of truth. Hobbes emphasized God's ability to enforce the moral law; Locke accentuated God's creation of the world; others emphasize God's character; one like Aquinas or Kant would point to how union with God is our highest good.

God understood in an Anselmian way has supreme knowledge, power, and goodness; arguably all of these, especially together, underwrite his moral authority. In view of his nature as a perfect being, what good grounds are there for doubting his authority? There is no bias, no imperfect understanding, no being blindsided, no possibility of misuse of power or of having obtained it wrongly. "If all rational withholdings are blocked, we ought to accept God as an authority. And part of what is involved in that is accepting his commands, unless we have good reason to do otherwise. Again, with a perfect being, there can't possibly be good reasons to do

otherwise. In short, we think the issue of authority is a matter of power, knowledge, and character, all of which add up to *moral* authority."[14]

John Hare formulates a related solution to Cudworth's objection that can be found in John Duns Scotus's and Samuel von Pufendorf's work. Both philosophers argued that the justification of obedience to God terminates in something that does not itself need justification. For Scotus, the principle that God is to be loved is known from its terms. So it does not require any justification from any prior principle. We know that God is to be loved, and thus obeyed, simply because we know that God is the supreme good. Pufendorf, similarly, regarded God's authority as axiomatic, in the same way mathematics has axioms or first principles that merit belief on their own evidence.[15]

Again, this is far from an exhaustive list of objections against DCT, but after considering various objections, those mentioned here and elsewhere, we still tend to adhere to the theory as an effective way of demarcating which prospective good actions, among all that may be performed, are specifically dutiful.

[1] Philosopher C. Stephen Evans identifies these four features of moral obligations: (1) A judgment about a moral obligation is a kind of verdict on my action. (2) A moral obligation brings reflection to closure. (3) A moral obligation involves accountability or responsibility. (4) A moral obligation holds for persons simply as persons. See C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligations* (Oxford University Press, 2011), chap. 5.

[2] "Afterword: Trent Dougherty and Alvin Plantinga: An Interview on Faith and Reason," in *Two Dozen (Or So) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project*, ed. Jerry L. Walls and Trent Dougherty (Oxford University Press, 2018), 447.

[3] Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (MIT Press, 2007), 57.

[4] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), chap. 1.

[5] "Divine Attitudes and the Nature of Morality: A Defense of a Theistic Account of Deontic Properties" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2009). This is Jordan's doctoral dissertation on the moral argument.

6 Philip L. Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Clarendon, 1978); Janine Marie Idziak, *Divine Command Morality: Historical and Contemporary Readings* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1980); Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999); William Alston, "What Euthyphro Should Have Said," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, ed. William L. Craig (Edinburgh University Press, 2001; Rutgers University Press, 2001), 283–98.

7 At least this is one version of DCT: God's commands constitute our moral obligations. Besides such a constitutivist view, DCT also comes in causal and prescriptive variants. Our focus will be on the constitutivist version.

8 See the responses by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong in William Lane Craig and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *God? A Debate Between a Christian and an Atheist* (Oxford University Press, 2004), and by Sinnott-Armstrong and Louise Antony in Paul Kurtz and William Lane Craig, *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009). Ironically, the distinction between moral ontology and moral epistemology is clearly drawn by Sinnott-Armstrong himself in his "Moral Skepticism and Justification," in *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Rimmons (Oxford University Press, 1996), 4–8.

9 Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit* (Prometheus, 1988), 65.

10 See Evans's article in *Moral Arguments for God's Existence*, ed. David Baggett and John E. Hare (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

11 See David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2011), chaps. 2, 6, 7, and appendix A. See also Matthew Flannagan, "Robust Ethics and the Autonomy Thesis," *Philosophia Christi* 19, no. 2 (2017): 345–62; "The Psychopath Objection to Divine Command Theory: Another Reply to Erik Wielenberg," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13, no. 3 (2021): 157–70; "Why the Horrendous Deeds Objection Is Still a Bad Argument," *Sophia* 61, no. 2 (2021): 399–418. See as well C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligations* (Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 4.

[12] See Baggett and Walls's *Good God* for a list of seven vital distinctions that together help answer a variety of Euthyphro-inspired objections to DCT.

[13] Thanks to Steve Evans for personal correspondence on this issue on January 2, 2025. For his latest work on this issue, see C. Stephen Evans, "Divine Command Theory, Voluntarism, and Accountability to God," in *Ist das Gute gut, weil Gott es will? Divine-Command-Theorien und die Grundlegung theologischer Ethik*, ed. Hendrik Klinge and Heiko Schulz (Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming in 2025). We are inclined to accept the discretionary hypothesis and see some of God's commands as neither necessary nor fixed. Giving a tithe of 10 percent is an example. But divine command theorists can disagree on this matter; the modal status thesis is arguably more essential to DCT.

[14] Baggett and Walls, *Good God*, 122–23.

[15] John E. Hare, *God's Command* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 58.

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Moral Knowledge

So far we have considered matters of moral ontology, specifically, issues of the moral good and the right. Prominently included when discussing values generally was consideration of human value in particular. Here we shift the focus to matters of moral epistemology, for another variant of the moral argument can come from this direction too. Earlier we distinguished the ontological points we were emphasizing from epistemological ones, but here we direct our gaze to the matter of moral knowledge. There's a variety of ways to approach this, but we will confine our attention mainly to debunking objections against moral knowledge and to the way that theism contains resources to evade their force.[1]

Evolutionary Ethics

That a substantial challenge to ethics might come from the arena of evolution is ironic in light of the soaring confidence with which many adherents of evolution have held that evolutionary ethics is the best way to understand the import of morality. Many thinkers today still echo great trust in evolutionary ethics to explicate the meaning, content, and justification of ethics, but some of the more rhetorically compelling illustrations of such unflagging confidence hail from Darwin's own Victorian age.

The more contemporary E. O. Wilson, endorser of "biologicizing" ethics, counsels replacing philosophers with scientists to adjudicate moral disagreements and answer the vexed questions of ethics. His towering confidence in reason and science to curb human aggression and move humanity into ever greater enlightenment led some to respond with more

than a modicum of incredulity at his unwavering optimism after the plethora of horrific atrocities to which the twentieth century has borne witness.

Thus the irony: Evolution might be suggested not to help the cause of ethics, but to hurt it. From some of the more unpalatable implications of social Darwinism to the eugenics movements of the twentieth century, it takes little imagination to envision how at least certain rhetoric inspired by Darwinian thought can yield unseemly fruit. This historical and recurring debate among evolutionists is importantly revelatory. The predominantly empirical approach of evolutionary ethicists invariably leads to an impasse, junctures at which the evidence to be adduced to aid us in filling in the substantive content of ethics is genuinely ambiguous. Is there a normative interpretation of evolution when it comes to deriving ethical principles? Even if there is, what is it? Tennyson's nature red in tooth and claw—cut-throat, scorched-earth competition of the survival of the fittest where the marginalized and oppressed invariably fall through the cracks and are rightly destined to suffer their fate? Or a world in which cooperation, empathy, and prosociality win the day, or something in between such stark alternatives? Arguably there is no shortage of either of these phenomena in nature.

It is genuinely challenging to avoid the appearance of evolutionary ethics being rather Janus-faced, projecting quite different pictures of ethics, and which picture is privileged easily comes from the eye of the beholder. This tension and ongoing dialogue among evolutionists resides at the heart of this chapter because it broaches the fundamental question of where adhering to evolutionary thought, and assigning to it a sort of primacy, will lead. It is not always as obvious as some think.

To answer whether we have good reason to think that we have moral knowledge, we wish to consider an important objection to this idea of moral knowledge from the arena of evolution. Then, in just a brief exploratory way, we will consider whether and how theism might inform the discussion, addressing those objections with its distinctive resources, thus bolstering our confidence that we possess moral knowledge after all.

Moral Justification

To say that we know a proposition is to say at least three things: First, we believe the proposition, and though there is much to say about what belief consists in, let us put that to the side for now. Second, the proposition is in fact true, typically by corresponding with the way reality actually is. We cannot know something false. Of course, we can know *that* something is false, like twice two is five; but we cannot know that twice two is five. And third, we need to add something to true beliefs that renders them items of knowledge. Some call this additional ingredient justification; others call it warrant. For now, let us call it justification, by which we mean something like sufficient evidence.

For knowledge to be distinctively moral is to delimit the scope of its content. Since morality involves questions of values and principles of conduct—good and bad, right and wrong, vice and virtue—moral knowledge claims might look like this: "Lying for purposes of self-aggrandizement is wrong." "Torturing children for the sheer fun of it is morally evil." "Integrity is a laudable virtue." Judging that we know such propositions, then, and to be correct in our claim, (1) we have to believe them, (2) they have to be true, and (3) we have to be adequately justified in believing them.

We want to focus our attention on the third requirement of moral knowledge—namely, the matter of justification. Legitimate moral knowledge claims must feature propositions adequately evidenced, sufficiently justified to believe. Are we adequately justified to believe in at least some of our moral judgments? Obviously not every knee-jerk and spontaneous moral assessment we make is well evidenced and sufficiently thoughtful, perhaps particularly on deeply vexed and complex moral questions involving a conflict of moral intuitions. But what about what seem to be eminently clear and central moral beliefs that are practically nonnegotiable? It is wrong to torture children for fun, for example. Are we adequately justified to believe such a proposition as that? (Recall our discussion of the nonnihilist criterion for moral realism in part 1.)

To avoid biting off more than we can chew, assume (for purposes of discussion) that some such moral propositions are true. If they are all false, we clearly cannot have knowledge of them, so game over. But even if some

moral claims are true, recall that this is only one of the three conditions that moral knowledge calls for. We have to believe the proposition, the proposition has to be true, and we need to be justified in believing it. What case, then, can be made for such justification? Here we will briefly touch on three attempts.

Deliberative Indispensability

First, David Enoch makes a case for the justification of moral beliefs in terms of what he dubs their "deliberative indispensability."[2] The basic idea is this: Just as something like various inferential patterns—such as abductive inferences to the best explanation—are necessary for our theoretical reasoning, likewise objectivity about the norms of practical reasoning seems ineliminable from our practical deliberation. When engaged in ethical deliberation, for example, we are aiming to get things right, to decide what makes best sense.

The guiding idea is that the similar phenomenology of theoretical and practical reasoning reveals that they share a great deal in common. They are both trying to get to a fact of the matter. At least sometimes, this effort unavoidably makes appeal to one's own desires. Allowing oneself to settle a deliberation by reference to a desire commits one to the normative judgment that the relevant desire makes the corresponding action the one that makes sense. This bespeaks commitment to normative truth at least of a sort.

This, though, as Angus Ritchie notes, is not yet enough to show a need for objective moral facts. Why think these facts are at least on occasion needed? Well, arguably it is this question of justification that shows itself to be an especially obstinate consideration when it comes to deliberating on our desires. "It is pretty implausible to claim," Ritchie puts it, "that the only thing I ever do when reflecting on my desires is to discern my own all-things-considered desire. My deliberation also involves considering whether my desires are excessively self-centred or shallow, and how they ought to be weighed against the desires and needs of others. It looks as if I am trying to get something right, and trying to revise my desires in the light of the fact of the matter about what is or is not right."[3]

Still, as Ritchie recognizes, there could be objective norms of practical reasoning without such norms being distinctively moral, but at the least, for now, we can say that if we were to reduce all of our moral judgments to sentiments, preferences, and conventions, and regard none of them as robustly objective moral claims, it could not help but affect our first-order moral attitudes. Ronald Dworkin captures this insight when he writes, using the example of abortion, "The claim that abortion is objectively wrong seems equivalent . . . to ordinary discourse, to . . . [the claim] that abortion would still be wrong even if no one thought it was. . . . I mean that abortion is just plain wrong, not wrong only because people think it is."[4]

Basic Beliefs

Some might suggest that so far this is less about justification than simply moral realism.[5] So another tactic or strategy to account for moral justification is this: Many epistemologists, following a modified foundationalist model of knowledge, suggest that there are certain beliefs that rightly function as the foundation for the rest of our knowledge. These foundational beliefs can be called basic beliefs, which are noninferential, which is to say that we do not infer them on the basis of other beliefs. Beliefs we do thus infer from other beliefs are in our superstructure of beliefs, but the foundational or basic beliefs are known more directly, without the need for discursive inference.

On a classical model of foundationalism, such basic beliefs are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible; they do not lack justification, but their justification does not come from other beliefs. Suppose I see a cloud in the sky. I am justified to believe it and may well know it, not because I am making an inference (about the reliability of my senses, for example) but simply because the belief was formed within me in the right sort of way.[6] A properly basic belief, then, is a basic belief that is formed in some such way, such that it is both noninferential and properly justified or warranted.

So what does this have to do with our axiomatic moral beliefs? When epistemologists found reasons to alter foundationalism from a classical model to a modified one—largely to avoid the problem of self-referential incoherence—they opened the door to a more expansive range of

propositions to qualify as properly basic. And among such properly basic beliefs may well be something like the moral convictions we've described. After all, such commitments seem to be about as sure as any of our other beliefs, and in fact we are hard-pressed to identify yet more basic beliefs by which to ground our most central and obvious moral convictions. So arguably we have good reasons to accept, say, the wrongness of torturing children for the fun of it; such a proposition may well qualify as a properly basic belief. As Reid might say, we are more inclined to argue *from* such a proposition than to argue *to* it. Recognition of a need for foundational convictions to serve at the base of our knowledge is a point that has resonances with both Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and Lewis's reflections in *The Abolition of Man*.[7]

Phenomenal Conservatism

Third, consider what some recent epistemologists have called "phenomenal conservatism," the view that if it seems to someone *S* that *p* is true, then *S* is prima facie justified in believing that *p*. Phenomenal conservatives nominalize how it seems to *S* as *S*'s "seemings," which refers to experienced mental states with propositional content and a distinct phenomenal character.[8] Seemings, like beliefs, have propositional content in that, just as *S* may believe that *p*, so it may seem to *S* that *p*. But whereas beliefs are true or false and are typically corrigible, seemings are veridical or nonveridical and uniformly incorrigible. Moreover, seemings have a forceful phenomenal character: They have a sort of felt veridicality that inclines us to believe their propositional content.[9] Seemings are thus causally and epistemically prior to beliefs, providing support for beliefs.

Given phenomenal conservatism, evidence comes cheap, so that the evidentialist demand for evidence as a necessary condition of epistemic justification is easy to satisfy. For as long as it seems to *S* that *p*, and *S* has no defeater of how things seem, *S* has adequate supporting evidence to believe that *p*. The application to our moral beliefs is obvious. In moral experience, we experience seemings with moral propositional content (e.g., "It is wrong to torture a child for fun"). In the absence of some defeater, we are arguably justified in holding such a moral belief. The belief remains entitled to its default status.

In sum, considerations concerning deliberative indispensability, proper basicality, and phenomenal conservatism can, to a degree individually but especially severally, plausibly be thought to help supply justification for at least some of our moral judgments. Combined with objective truth and belief, this would be enough to make moral knowledge possible. But this all depends on the absence of defeaters, especially defeaters for our justification, either rebutting or undercutting ones.[10]

Evolution

An important potential defeater is evolutionary theory. To begin with, what is it we are getting at when we refer to evolution? In *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, philosopher Alvin Plantinga helpfully illuminates this matter by drawing a few distinctions.

Meaning of Evolution

He identifies a cluster of ideas often associated with evolution: (1) the ancient earth thesis, (2) the progress thesis (life has progressed from relatively simple to relatively complex forms), (3) the thesis of descent with modification, (4) the common ancestry thesis, (5) the claim that there is a naturalistic mechanism driving this process of descent with modification (the most popular candidate is natural selection operating on random genetic mutation), and (6) the naturalistic origins thesis (that life itself developed from nonliving matter without any special creative activity of God but just by virtue of processes described by the ordinary laws of physics and chemistry).

Plantinga employs the locution “evolution” to denote the first four of these theses and “Darwinism” to include the added commitment to natural selection as the underlying mechanism of evolution. The final thesis, the naturalistic origins thesis, he notes, is not really part of the theory of evolution. The notion of evolution as an unguided process, in other words, is what he dubs a “theological add-on.”[11]

Do not the random genetic mutations on which natural selection is predicated rule out the notion that they could be caused by God? In reply,

Plantinga argues that randomness as construed by contemporary biologists does not have the implication of mere chance. He quotes Elliott Sober, for example, an eminent philosopher of biology, who says that there is no physical mechanism that detects which mutations would be beneficial and causes those mutations to occur.[12] Their being random in that sense, Plantinga argues, would be compatible with their being directed (caused by God, for example).

Plantinga is of the view that theistic belief is consistent with the claims of evolution and even Darwinism but not of the sixth thesis that the process of evolution is unguided—the idea that no personal agent, not even God, has guided, directed, orchestrated, or shaped it.[13] Naturalism says more than atheism, but since it entails atheism, it would preclude the process of evolution from being guided. Such an assumption goes beyond evolution and Darwinism and is an ambitious claim about the nature of reality. Merely to build or bake it into one's conception of evolution is an unprincipled maneuver.

The naturalistic origins thesis, truth be told, is the likely source of much resistance to evolution by those theists who buy into the misguided notion that evolution commits them to saying that God had nothing to do with the process of human development. To such conjectures they are understandably averse. Plantinga rightly rejects this construal of evolution as entailing an unguided process, opting instead for the choice of leaving as an open question whether the evolutionary process was guided, a matter quite relevant to our assessment of the debunking challenge to morality.

So let us proceed on the assumption that evolution involves an old earth, progress, descent with modification, common ancestry, and a naturalistic mechanism operating on random mutation. The naturalistic origins thesis is less a function of evolution than a naturalistic supplement to evolution. Such an origins thesis reveals a juncture where discussion has subtly shifted from science to scientism and from evolution alone to something like the conjunction of evolution and naturalism.

Evolutionary Debunking Argument

On the assumption of something like Darwinian evolution, then, the question becomes, Does such a picture provide reasons to cast moral

realism or moral knowledge in doubt? Some have argued that the answer is yes, advancing evolutionary debunking arguments (or EDAs) to make their case. Expressed in discursive format, EDAs generally look something like this:

1. Darwinian forces have had a pervasive influence on our moral beliefs [empirical premise].
2. If 1, then our moral beliefs have greatly diminished epistemic status or are completely debunked [epistemic premise].
3. So, our moral beliefs have greatly diminished epistemic status or are completely debunked.[14]

Before looking at a few salient examples of EDAs, allow us to say a word about the target of such arguments.

One way to effect the transition from an undercutting defeater against moral knowledge to a rebutting claim against substantive moral metaphysics is via a redundancy claim, which has analogies outside of ethics. In the philosophy of mathematics, for example, anti-Platonists try to defeat indispensability arguments for numbers by arguing that we can explain our use of number words and concepts without commitment to numbers, so we can trim our ontology and exclude numbers. Or in philosophy of mind, physicalists like Ted Honderich and Jaegwon Kim try to show that an analysis of behavior shows there is no need or room to postulate distinctively mental states with their own causal power: They are causally effete and thus redundant riders, because physical events do all the work that needs doing. Parsimony then gets us physicalism—or something in its close vicinity.

What an evolutionary naturalist debunker opposed to moral realism might say is that if our moral feelings and judgments can be fully explained without appeal to moral values, then those values are redundant and can be excised from our ontology. Nietzsche's view was along these lines: Looking out on the world described by Darwinian materialism, he could discern no moral facts, and he offered an account of our moral judgments that does not require there to be any moral facts. If his account is plausible—that we are offering interpretations or imposing moral constructs on the world, and we

can explain the origin of moral sentiments in terms of instincts oriented to our survival alone—then it might be claimed that this shows moral facts to be dispensable, eliminable from our ontology.

If we can fully explain why we make moral judgments without appeal to moral values, then they are out of a job in our ontology. This seems to be the way hard-nosed materialists see things. They might agree it is still useful to view people from a "moral stance," that it is instrumentally useful to treat people as if they are moral beings, while maintaining that this is a useful fiction.[15] But here we begin to get into specific formulations of EDAs, so let us turn now to a brief review of the major debunkers. For present purposes it will suffice to focus on two in particular: Michael Ruse and Sharon Street.

The Empirical Premise

Ruse's 1986 *Taking Darwin Seriously* presents an account of how Darwinian evolution bears on epistemology and ethics, and its last chapter offers his debunking account. In terms of the empirical premise, Ruse, while rejecting group selection, cites kin selection and reciprocity as the two main ways in which to account for helping and cooperative behavior.[16] He lauds kin selection in particular as one of the great triumphs of twentieth-century biology. Ruse points in particular to primatologist Frans de Waal's study of primates to demonstrate their resemblance to human morality.

De Waal's findings provide just the sort of evidence that one like Ruse adduces to bolster the empirical (or causal) premise. Ruse is not insistent that all our behavior is controlled by reciprocity or kin selection but is instead inquiring "whether we have innate tendencies or dispositions inclining us to social thoughts and actions, which later would improve our reproductive chances."[17] Darwinian forces, he is convinced, are responsible for our basic moral inclinations, even though culture still plays a role in developing them.[18] He likens this to a skeleton (our biology) and flesh (culture), while he leaves "relatively unexplored the ways in which cultures, under the influence of biology, actually develop."[19]

Even more than Ruse, Sharon Street has garnered the most attention of all as a debunker. She begins with our evaluative judgments and works backward. Specifically, she posits that certain kinds of evaluative judgments, such as endangering one's own survival and causing harm to one's own kin, would have a very negative impact on one's success at survival and reproduction. Meanwhile, other kinds of evaluative judgments, such as promoting one's own survival and caring for one's own offspring, would have a correspondingly positive impact on survival and reproductive success.[20] She argues that the fact that so many of our evaluative judgments correspond to what promotes reproductive success, and the absence of judgments which have the opposite tendency, is evidence "in favor of the view that natural selection has had a tremendous influence on that content."[21]

Like others, Street considers the observable behavior of many nonhuman species, particularly the higher primates, to be additional evidence of the influence of evolutionary forces on our evaluative tendencies. She concludes, "We may view many of our evaluative judgments as conscious, reflective endorsements of more basic evaluative tendencies that we share with other animals."[22] However, she argues that the influence of evolutionary forces on our evaluative judgments is indirect in shaping our basic evaluative tendencies.[23] Other factors can and do influence the judgments that we actually make, including the crucial and sui generis influence of rational reflection that must also be taken into account.[24]

Still, in setting the stage for her debunking argument, Street maintains that the influence of evolutionary forces on our evaluative judgments is pervasive through the basic underlying tendencies that we have inherited from our evolutionary past. She also argues that the "truth of some account very roughly along these lines is all that is required for the Darwinian Dilemma to get off the ground," which will be explained more fully below.[25]

The Only Etiology in Town

Ruse and Street both seem to gesture toward this nonnegotiable fact: It is inevitable that morality, whatever it exactly amounts to, must invariably

find its origin in our evolutionary story. Of that they seem sure, although they admit that the specific and precise mechanisms for how this played out remain a matter of some conjecture, so a strong dose of provisionality is appropriate on that score. Their tentativeness on the specifics, however, does not discourage or dissuade them from using the empirical premise with confidence in their debunking arguments. The reason for the presumption seems to be an assumption that *merely possible* fine-grained accounts of evolutionary genealogies of morality are enough.

The specific details of how evolution produces the human moral sense largely do not matter to the debunkers because they are interested less in showing how evolution accomplished such a feat than simply that it *could* have. Philip Kitcher likely speaks for all of them in his characterization of the possibility of an evolutionary genealogy of morality: "The principal reason for taking the possibility seriously lies in the difficulty of thinking of serious rivals."[26] In the introduction to *The Ethical Project*, Kitcher adds that his position on the evolution of ethics allows only such novel entities that can be justified through accepted methods of rigorous inquiry. "Appeals to divine will, to a realm of values, to faculties of ethical perception and 'pure practical reason,' have to go."[27]

The main point to emphasize for now is that the reason the debunkers seem sanguine in their contentment with the mere possibility of naturalistic explanations and origins of morality is that there is simply no other operative game in town. Hence, possibilities, even remote ones, that comport with the only legitimate contender—naturalism and Darwinism—are enough to endorse the empirical premise. Getting the specific details of the causal premise right is simply not necessary. In a particularly telling passage, Ruse writes, "We know that evolution occurred, that it was Darwinian in nature, and that humans are part of the natural order. Therefore, in something as important to us as our morality, there is a strong presumption that natural selection will have had a causal influence. Such a presumption may ultimately prove wrong. I doubt anyone expects a definitive case. Nevertheless, we go into our enquiry with a great deal of positive background knowledge."[28]

Such debunkers are all assuming not just evolution but evolution and naturalism. As such they import the naturalistic origins thesis into their analysis, and by their own admission they think that naturalists like

themselves are hard-pressed to hold on to moral realism and any moral knowledge predicated on such realism. Part of what Ruse considers our positive background knowledge is that nothing like theism is relevant to this discussion, and nothing like divine guidance of the process of evolution is a realistic possibility. At least prima facie, this attitude makes it difficult indeed for naturalists to evade the force of the empirical premise.

The Epistemic Premise

Let us now turn our attention to the epistemic premise, which says that if Darwinian forces have indeed had a pervasive influence on our moral beliefs, then our moral beliefs have greatly diminished epistemic status or are completely debunked. Ruse thinks that the import of the challenge is that we should reject moral objectivism in favor of moral subjectivism. On his view, vice and virtue are relevantly like secondary properties, as David Hume thought.[29] The mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects, so that the subjective feelings that result from the contemplation of some act are mistaken for perceptions of objective properties of the act itself. C. S. Lewis similarly said that if naturalism is true and human moral beliefs are ultimately the product of our evolution, then the transcendental pretensions of morality are exposed for a sham.

Ruse recognizes that the traditional concern with subjectivism is that it lacks authority to be prescriptively binding. Morality is thought to be more objective than that. Ruse's answer is that the Darwinian explanation handles this issue not by explaining how morality actually does have binding authority but rather by explaining why there is this misleading appearance. Ruse writes, "The point about morality (says the Darwinian) is that it is an adaptation to get us to go beyond regular wishes, desires, and fears, and to interact socially with people. How does it get us to do this? By filling us full of thoughts about obligations and duties, and so forth. And the key to what is going on is that we are then moved to action, precisely because we think morality is something laid upon us."[30] His argument is that Darwinism accounts for the true nature of our moral experience by revealing to us that we have previously been mistaken about it.

Street distinguishes between basic evaluative tendencies and full-fledged evaluative judgments, arguing that relentless selective pressure has had a direct and tremendous influence on our basic evaluative tendencies and these, in turn, have had a major—though not necessarily overriding—indirect effect on our actual moral beliefs or full-fledged evaluative judgments. All our basic moral judgments are formed within an evolutionary framework, which leaves room for reason, but only as a slave of the passions. Hers is a Humean constructivism, as we saw earlier in the book.

In Street's formulation, there is a dilemma for the value realist based on whether there is a relation between evolutionary forces, on the one hand, and the independent evaluative truths affirmed by the realist, on the other.[31] Starting with the assumption that there are attitude-independent, evaluative truths, the first horn in Street's dilemma says that there is no relation between these truths and evolutionary forces, while the second horn says that there is. Either way, argues Street, the realist is stuck in the unfortunate position of having no reliable knowledge of the independent evaluative truths. Given this predicament, Street argues that we are forced to give up realism altogether and adopt antirealism with respect to evaluative truths.[32]

It is telling that the best-known proponents of EDAs, naturalists all, take their import to be a rejection of moral realism. Ruse becomes a moral subjectivist, and Street adopts a version of constructivism.[33] They abandon the notion that morality is objectively (robustly) true, and thus knowledge of such truths becomes impossible. There are, of course, plenty of naturalist-leaning thinkers who want to argue that the evolutionary debunking case against moral realism is not decisive, but because of the delimited scope of our project we are not going to discuss those defenses of secular moral realism here. We are rather going to spend the rest of this chapter on the matter of whether theism—supernaturalism, a theistic hypothesis—might help defuse debunking concerns.

Might Theism Help?

Erik Wielenberg has noted that more work by theists addressing debunking objections should be done, and this is our intent here. By theism, again, is

meant belief in a self-subsistent, omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent, and personal deity. Note that the arguments so far considered have been predicated on the conviction that Darwinism gives an "entire analysis" of our moral sentiments, such that nothing more is needed. But the insight of Plantinga's earlier point is that this is to import into Darwinism an absence of teleology, which is underdetermined by Darwinism. Ruse and Street (and Joyce) are smuggling in their naturalistic convictions that a theist would have grounds for resisting.

If there are principled grounds for resisting aspects of EDAs, it may go to show that theism provides an effective answer to debunking. This is not enough, by itself, to make the moral argument for God, but if, ultimately, the theistic answer is more persuasive than the naturalistic one, then that would strengthen a moral case for God's existence to at least some degree. For now, let us simply ask, What are some of the resources from theism that might help answer the debunking challenge?

Four Variants of Debunking

To help structure our discussion, let us review four variants of debunking by quickly enumerating and articulating them using Paul Rezkalla's succinct and perspicacious taxonomy.[34] First, there is the cosmic coincidence issue: Evolutionary pressures are thought to distort our moral beliefs, not enable them to discriminate between what is true and what is not. Second, the truth and inclusive fitness problem: Truth-tracking is thought to be incidental to fitness-tracking; perhaps sometimes they overlap, but such cases are rare. To illustrate such challenges, Street uses the analogy of someone trying to sail to Bermuda by simply allowing the wind and waves to guide their vessel. Very rarely, the boat may end up in Bermuda, but most of the time that obviously will not happen. Likewise with our moral judgments shaped by the evolutionary process privileging fitness.

Third, a justification problem: If our beliefs are formed by an unreliable process, they lack justification or warrant; and if our moral beliefs are formed in this way, we lack moral knowledge—even if moral realism is true. And fourth, a contingency problem: Had evolution played out differently, morality for us could look quite different from how it does.

Sometimes this is called the problem of Darwinian counterfactuals, because this very question was raised by Darwin himself when he imagined this scenario: “If . . . men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brother, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering.”[35]

To tackle such objections from a supernatural perspective, it bears emphasis that the central-most relevant feature of a theistic picture that gets added to the mix is a rejection of the natural origins thesis—and a corresponding affirmation that the process of evolution could have been directed by God after all and, as a result, be more goal- or telos-driven than would otherwise be plausible to believe. This directedness of the process of evolution may well prove to be just what is needed to avoid the problems of debunking.

Regarding the cosmic coincidence of moral truth and our moral judgments, evolution need not have been a purposeless process in which such coincidence or correspondence was a matter of infinitesimal likelihood. God’s purposeful control over evolutionary processes could ensure the intended destination be achieved. Regarding truth and inclusive fitness, theistic evolution allows for a teleological underpinning of the evolutionary story that permits and is even conducive to the tracking hypothesis.

As for the contingency problem, teleology can continue to help a great deal. A purposive account of the universe can both do justice to our pre-philosophical moral commitments, unlike the departures from moral realism we see among the debunkers, and explain the human acquisition of epistemic capacities that track moral truth. It avoids the explanatory gap that comes from asking how human beings, developing in a physical universe that is not itself shaped by any purposive force, come to have the capacity to apprehend objective moral norms. To close this gap, an account is needed of the coincidence between our moral judgments and moral truth. Again, supernaturalism may well be a plausible prescription.

Theistic Resources

So how might theism accomplish this feat? Maybe something like this: God knew that our possession of moral knowledge would be objectively valuable, which gives him good reason to make this happen. Desiring this state of affairs, and knowing how to bring it about, God had the power to make it happen and took actions to do so, and this intrinsically valuable state of affairs of our possession of moral knowledge was the result.[36]

Tomás Bogardus has argued that the heart of EDAs is the worry that our moral faculties have been selected for adaptiveness and not truth, and that this should be a concern especially for naturalists. Escape hatches that can circumvent the challenge, like appeals to divine help or direct rational intuition, are either a bad theoretical or a bad practical concomitant for a naturalistic worldview, whereas such appeals fit naturally into and figure centrally in a theistic perspective.[37]

As Angus Ritchie puts it,

> A theistic explanation of the emergence of moral knowledge need not conflict with a version of the theory of natural selection. The theist need not deny that the processes described by evolutionary biology explain the generation of human convictions about ethics, and their capacity to reason about these convictions and refine them. All that the theist needs to add to the account given by evolutionary biology is the claim that the world is providentially ordered so that the interaction of the quasi-teleological process of natural selection and of the spandrel-like features it generates yield an outcome which enables human beings to apprehend that which is of objective value.[38]

The theist is in a position to say why there is a necessary connection between certain natural properties and their supervenient moral properties, and an account of the developing of human moral faculties—a theistic genealogy of morals. This account allows for something akin to Street's "tracking relation": We have the basic moral beliefs we do because they are true, and this is because the mechanisms responsible for those moral beliefs are aimed at truth. The theist is in a position to offer a narrative that can explain the general reliability of at least those most axiomatic of our moral judgments.

The great eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid, recall, appealed to a set of first or self-evident principles of morality able to be discerned through reliable epistemic faculties. There are moral beliefs to which we should pay homage—utilizing them as data for the construction of moral theories or as a kind of court of appeal in assessing them. As Mark

Linville and others have insightfully pointed out, our confidence in these beliefs is wisely invested only in the event that we have reason to believe the faculties responsible for them to be truth-aimed.[39] Reid's theism provided him with such a response; the moral faculties were forged in the same shop as our other cognitive faculties, designed by God for the purpose of discovering moral truth. "That conscience which is in every man's breast," he wrote, "is the law of God written in his heart, which he cannot disobey without acting unnaturally, and being self-condemned."[40]

On this sort of story, one does not encounter the evolutionary debunking objection as a defeater, because God's providential ordering of the process amounts to a defeater-defeater, or perhaps, in the words of Alvin Plantinga, a defeater-deflector. A defeater-defeater is used to restore the epistemic credentials of a belief that is facing a defeater, but a defeater-deflector prevents a would-be defeater from becoming a defeater in the first place.[41]

This, then, could be the start of a broader moral apologetic for theism—one based on moral knowledge predicated on robust moral realism. We have only gestured in the direction of the challenge debunking poses to naturalists, but if the case can be sustained that theism provides better resources for avoiding the force of such objections than those of naturalism, the prospects for an epistemic moral argument for God seem rife with potential.[42]

1 For another treatment of moral epistemology, see David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning* (Oxford University Press, 2016), chap. 6.

2 David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 54–99. We discussed deliberative indispensability at the end of part 2.

3 Angus Ritchie, *From Morality to Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 25.

4 Ronald Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25, no. 2 (1996): 98.

5 This despite "indispensabilism," which has been defined like this: If a belief-forming method is indispensable to the project of practical deliberation, then that method is a source of basic epistemic justification. Tristram McPherson and David Plunkett argue that indispensabilism should be rejected. See their "Deliberative Indispensability and Epistemic Justification," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 10, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford University Press, 2015), 104–33.

6 This is how Plantinga would characterize it. Some years back, Quinn demurred, arguing that in such instances there were inferences, after all, just very fast ones.

7 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Harper & Row, 1969); C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: Or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (HarperOne, 2001).

8 William Tolhurst, "Seemings," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1998): 293–302; Blake McAllister, "Seemings as Sui Generis," *Synthèse* 195 (2018): 3079–96. McAllister observes that "such language is ubiquitous in contemporary epistemology" (3079).

9 Tolhurst, "Seemings," 298–99.

10 It is useful to bear in mind a distinction between sorts of defeaters. *Rebutting defeaters* show the belief in question to be false. For example, looking through the window and seeing that the sky is clear is evidence for the belief that it is not raining outside. So this perception is a rebutting defeater of the belief that it is raining. *Undercutting defeaters*, in contrast, show the belief in question to lack justification, though it still may turn out to be true. For example, suppose I see a horse in the room but then find out that you slipped me a pill that makes me see horses. I now have an undercutting defeater for my belief that there is a horse in the room—even though it may turn out that there really is a horse in the room. Still, I lack justification to believe it. So in the next section let us lay out one of the more important potential defeaters of moral justification and thus of moral knowledge.

11 Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 8–10.

12 Elliott Sober, "Evolution Without Metaphysics?," in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. J. Kvanvig (Oxford University Press, 2011),

vol. 3.

13 Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 12.

14 Thanks to John Fraser for this formulation.

15 As Richard Joyce does. Thanks to Angus Menuge in personal correspondence from January 21, 2022, for invaluable insights here.

16 Michael Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously* (Basil Blackwell, 1986), 201, 218.

17 Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously*, 230.

18 Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously*, 234–35.

19 Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously*, 245n5. Like Ruse, Richard Joyce offers a book-length treatment of the evolutionary genealogy of our moral faculties and beliefs in his *Evolution of Morality* (MIT Press, 2007).

20 Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (2006): 114.

21 Street, "Darwinian Dilemma," 117.

22 Street, "Darwinian Dilemma," 117.

23 Street, "Darwinian Dilemma," 120.

24 Street, "Darwinian Dilemma," 113–14.

25 Street, "Darwinian Dilemma," 121.

26 Philip Kitcher, "Biology and Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (Oxford University Press, 2006), 172.

27 Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 3–4.

28 Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously*, 224.

29 Unlike objective primary properties like shape or weight, secondary properties are mind-dependent attributes of objects like color, taste, or sound perceptions.

30 Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously*, 253.

31 Street, "Darwinian Dilemma," 121.

32 Street, "Darwinian Dilemma," 141.

33 Joyce adopts an error theory and fictionalist account of morality.

34 Paul Rezkalla, "Theism and Evolutionary Debunking Arguments Against Moral Realism," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12, no. 3 (2021): 41–52.

35 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (1871; repr., Prometheus Books, 1998), 102.

[36] Angus Ritchie, *From Morality to Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 163–64.

[37] Tomás Bogardus, "Only All Naturalists Should Worry About Only One Evolutionary Debunking Argument," *Ethics* 126, no. 3 (April 2016): 636–61.

[38] Ritchie, *From Morality to Metaphysics*, 174.

[39] Mark Linville, "The Moral Argument," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Blackwell, 2012).

[40] Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays* (Hackett, 1983), 355.

[41] Andrew Moon, "Debunking Morality: Lessons from the EAAN Literature," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 98 (2017): 208–26.

[42] Between Ruse's and Joyce's debunking arguments, by the way, came Alvin Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism (EAAN) in his 1993 *Warrant and Proper Function*. The debunking objections share the same basic premise as Plantinga's that natural selection favors adaptive behavior, except that the debunkers tend to delimit their target to moral beliefs. Plantinga's EAAN provides a crushing defeater of belief in the conjunction of evolution and naturalism, effectively debunking the debunkers! Plantinga's argument also brings to mind both C. S. Lewis's argument from reason in the third chapter of *Miracles* and Victor Reppert's more recent up-to-date extensions of Lewis's argument(s). C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (1947; repr., HarperOne, 2001); and Victor Reppert, *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason* (InterVarsity, 2003).

14

An Argument from Grace

Chapters 11–13 covered central matters of moral ontology and epistemology, which arguably reside at the heart of this discussion. Still, there are other aspects of an overall moral argument that can and should be discussed. Salient among them are the two aspects of what some have called Kantian moral faith—namely, our need to be morally changed in order to live up to the moral demand (and relatedly, to be forgiven for falling short of the ideal and ultimately conformed entirely to its dictates) and the need for morality and rationality to be reconciled. This chapter will deal with the former, and chapter 15 with the latter.

Human beings are valuable, but that doesn't mean that we are good. The fourth major piece of moral evidence to consider is moral transformation. Following John Hare's custom in his book called *God's Command*, we will call this argument the "argument from grace." There are three deep moral needs we as human beings display, and this version of the moral argument addresses all three—namely, our need to be *forgiven*, our need to be *changed*, and our need to be *perfected*. Each of these existential needs we possess as human beings corresponds to an important aspect of Christian salvation. And the fact that Christian theology so impeccably addresses each of these deep needs gives us moral reasons to take theism generally and Christianity specifically most seriously.

Forgiveness

Readers might remember that in book 1 of *Mere Christianity* C. S. Lewis says two things are at the heart of our understanding of reality: First, there

is a moral law, and second, we all fall short of it. There is a moral standard that is objective and universal. It is binding and authoritative on us, but we invariably fall short of meeting it. This results in a disconnect or a "gap" between the best we can do and what morality requires, not to mention the objective condition of guilt for falling short morally. And this gap needs addressing. Earlier we encountered an explanatory gap in the realm of epistemology that proves especially challenging for our secular interlocutors; now we encounter a behavioral gap that threatens to pose an insuperable challenge to secular ethics.

That we intuitively sense there to be a moral standard that we fall short of leaves us with a condition of guilt in need of fixing. And if we take our feelings of guilt as more than *mere* feelings, and something like a real objective condition of guilt, we are left wondering if there is a solution. We need forgiveness for having fallen short of the moral standard—and not just falling short in the past but continuing to fall short all the time. Forgiveness is a basic and perpetual existential human need. Robert Adams offered a few variants of the moral argument, mostly focused on recondite matters of metaphysics and epistemology, but as an aside he noted that he could have constructed a moral argument just as effective by appeal to the issue of forgiveness.[1] This is what we'll be getting at here.

An apologetic focus on forgiveness is one way that the moral argument serves as the perfect pathway to the gospel of Christ—indeed, we have fallen short and are in need of forgiveness. And God offers us that forgiveness through the death and resurrection of Christ. Readers may recognize that all of this broaches the theological topic of *justification*. So the first point to emphasize is that this version of the moral argument suggests that God by his grace can forgive us of our moral wrongdoing, functioning as an ideal way to introduce the good news of the gospel. We have a problem of guilt and of shame (both deserved and undeserved), but God offers the solution, by his grace. Mercifully, because of God's provision in Christ, forgiveness is available for those who seek it, and we can also find the resources to forgive others.

Moral Transformation

But more than forgiveness is required. Another part of a reconciled relationship with God has to do with the next step or stage of salvation—what theologians call "sanctification." Intimate and organic connections obtain between justification and sanctification, but rather than offering an exegetical analysis, we are using these categories as a way to connect the parts of Christian salvation with aspects of the moral argument. After our conversion to Christ, we are still left with a moral gap—the space between where we are morally and spiritually, on the one hand, and where we need to be, on the other. We have a long way to go; this is true for us all. That gap needs to be closed. To be forgiven without being changed leaves too much undone.

Yet another way to put it is like this: We need more than our sins to be forgiven; we need our sin problem itself to be taken away. A documentary concerning the issue of nutrition and physical health we saw a few years ago may be helpful here by way of analogy. One of its basic claims was that doctors do not really produce health. About the best they can do is remove some barriers that impede and stand in the way of health. What actually produces health is the properly functioning body—a healthy immune system: a body, properly treated and fed, doing what it was meant to do. This is most clearly seen when it comes to chronic diseases. Doctors and pharmaceutical companies cannot fix such problems. What they can do is provide medicines that help alleviate and manage certain symptoms and make life more comfortable for the patient, even while the affliction persists, managed to one degree or another.

There is a crucial difference between genuine health, on the one hand, and merely improving conditions, on the other, however much a blessing the latter can be. Another fitting analogy would be the distinction between pulling out a weed versus killing its root. The former is at best a temporary fix; the underlying problem will persist until the latter step is taken.

A similar distinction holds in the arena of morality. One option is merely to deal with symptoms, settling for marginal moral improvements, avoiding hurtful consequences by our actions, seeking forgiveness for wrongdoing, that sort of thing. True acquisition of integrity, virtue, and holiness, though, requires considerably more. In light of what seem to be some deeply entrenched patterns of selfishness and moral weakness endemic to the

human condition, we need powerful resources to meet the moral demand and effect the needed change in our character.

Benjamin Franklin once tried to do this on his own, setting himself to the formidable task of achieving moral perfection. In "Arriving at Perfection," an excerpt from his *Autobiography*, he wrote about his plans to conquer all imperfections that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead him into, but "I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employ'd in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason."[2]

Immanuel Kant recognized that we fall short of what morality requires, and so he said we need to have moral faith: the belief that the moral life is *possible*. But in light of our moral malady, this requires radical transformation. Can we be transformed? This is a second great existential moral need, after forgiveness. Perhaps owing to his Lutheran upbringing, Kant was quite sure that human beings have a deep moral problem, a tendency to be curved inward on themselves, an intractable ethical taint, a deeply flawed moral disposition in need of a revolution. Kant saw clearly that the moral demand on us is very high, while also recognizing that we have a natural propensity not to follow it.

Malcolm Muggeridge is thought to have said that the depravity of man is at once the most empirically verifiable reality but at the same time the most intellectually resisted fact. G. K. Chesterton once said that original sin was "the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved."[3] Humans are infinitely valuable but are not essentially good, morally speaking. We are broken, deeply broken, and need to be healed at the root, not merely to have the symptoms removed. As Clay Jones puts it, and a book like *Ordinary Men* demonstrates, all of us are born Auschwitz-enabled.[4] The people responsible for such unspeakable atrocities of history were not, as human beings go, preternaturally bad people. They were, sober truth be told, garden-variety human beings who, when certain circumstances presented themselves, behaved deplorably. All of us have that hideous potential. Moral ugliness lurks in each of our hearts. There is something in need of radical fixing deep within us. We all need major moral surgery.

The moral standard remains obstinately in place, but because of our moral weakness, corrupt characters, irremediable selfishness, intractable

egoism, and the like, we are unable to meet that standard on our own. A basic moral principle seems to be that "ought implies can" in some sense—we cannot be obligated to do what we cannot do—and yet we *do* seem to be obligated to do what we simply cannot: meet the moral demand. How can this make sense?

Augustine offered the crucial insight: God bids us to do what we cannot, in order that we might learn our dependence on him. We cannot live as we ought in our own strength alone, but we can live as we ought by God's grace, with divine assistance. So, apart from God's grace, our moral prognosis is bad; but there is great hope. The hope we have that will not disappoint is most assuredly a function not of a false hope that comes from sticking our heads in the sand but of facing the darkness head-on. Christianity teaches that the needed resources for radical transformation are available. Although we cannot meet the moral demand on our own, God himself has made it possible, if we but submit and allow him to do it through us. It may well require a painful process, but it is possible.

Christianity teaches that there is abundant hope indeed. Our having been made in God's image is essential to our identity; our sin nature is not. The latter is a merely contingent feature of who we are. Closer to our core identity is our having been made in God's image. We are valuable but not good; but we can become good as we allow God to deliver us from our moral dysfunction and conform us to his image. God can do more than merely ameliorate the symptoms of our chronic moral malady. In the face of our urgent need to become not just *better* people but *new* people, and our desperate need for a revolution of the will and for radical moral transformation, the death and resurrection of Christ is indeed "good news." This issue of transformation, again, involves the Christian theological category of *sanctification*. Just as God answers our need for forgiveness, God's grace in sanctification answers our need for radical moral transformation.

By the way, biblical holiness is not just *individual* but *social*. And here Paul Copan has done us a great service by bringing a historical twist to the moral argument. He has shown how historically it has been Christ followers who were largely responsible for such significant social advances as building orphanages, arguing for the inherent dignity of the handicapped and infirm, fighting for women's suffrage, standing against foot-binding,

and so forth. This investigation gets into historical contingencies, but it remains an important empirical consideration, one that brings to mind John Wesley's refrain that there is no holiness without social holiness.[5]

Moral Perfection

Then there is one more step: not just to be wholly forgiven and radically transformed, but also for the process to culminate, for the work to be finished. We need the good work that has been begun within us to be completed, which God promises to do at the day of Christ Jesus for those who trust him. And so what we are talking about now is the Christian category of *glorification*, when we are entirely conformed to the image of Jesus, morally beautified to the uttermost, every last vestige of sin having been excised and expunged.

Interestingly, Immanuel Kant thought that human beings would never achieve what he called a "holy will," which he considered reserved for God alone. The process of moral perfection was thus something at best approached asymptotically—a mathematical term invoking the specter of getting closer and closer to the goal but never fully arriving at it. It is a process that is never completed, he thought, so this served as the basis of his argument for immortality, since the process must continue forever.

Although it is true that in some sense we will forever continue to grow morally, on the Christian story, the process of complete deliverance from sin will be completed. Such a tantalizing prospect answers to a deep intuitive recognition of a third basic moral drive or need, or maybe aspiration—yet one, once more, beyond the reach of our own capacities without divine grace—the hunger to be perfected, turned into the best versions of ourselves, delivered entirely from the power and consequences of sin. Christianity assures us, and we have principled reasons to believe, that this is no Pollyannaish pipe dream but rather a reality we can look forward to with a real and steady hope. Indeed, if such hope is available, might we have a duty to hold it?[6]

So Christian theology suggests that Kant was both right and wrong. He was wrong to think we will not be perfected. The Christian doctrine of glorification is about the process of sanctification reaching an end point.

Ultimately sin *will* be completely defeated within us, and we will find complete deliverance from its power and consequences. That is a glorious hope. Still, Kant was also likely right that there will remain a movement, a dynamism, even after the point of glorification. For one thing, the prospect of beholding the glory and beauty and goodness of God is an unending process. For another, it is only when full deliverance from sin is achieved that the fullest life for which we were created can really begin, which even the present life already intimates.

A. E. Taylor wrote eloquently about this in his *Faith of a Moralist*:

> The moral life does not consist merely in getting into right relations with our fellows or our Maker. That's only preliminary to the real business: to live in them. Even in this life we have to do more than unlearn unloving. We have to practice giving love actual embodiment. This is continuous with what is morally of highest importance and value in our present life. . . . Heaven must be a land of delightful surprises. We should have learned to love every neighbor who crosses our path, to hate nothing that God has made, to be indifferent to none of the mirrors of His light. But even where there is no ill-will or indifference to interfere with love, it is still possible for love to grow as understanding grows.[7]

Combining all three subpoints of this argument, what we have is a three-pronged performative moral argument built on God's grace. It is by God's grace that we can find the forgiveness we desperately need for having fallen short of the moral standard, something we all do. It is by God's grace that we can be set free from both our subjective feelings and our objective condition of guilt. It is by God's grace that we can be gradually changed and made more like Christ, with less and less of a taste for sin and more and more of a hunger for righteousness. And it is by God's grace that eventually we will be entirely conformed to the image of Christ and delivered completely from sin's power and consequences.

From first to last, what answers our deepest moral needs—for forgiveness, for change, and for perfection—is the astounding grace of a good God perfect in holiness and perfect in love. And this is a delightful example of how a variant of the moral argument points not just to God's existence but to his goodness and love and grace—and indeed points arguably not just to theism but to Christianity in particular.

Having started his book *Mere Christianity* with talk of the moral gap between what we are and what we ought to be, Lewis then explained his

reason for doing so. His explanation is telling. The passage can be found in his concluding paragraph of book 1:

> My reason was that Christianity simply does not make sense until you have faced the sort of facts I have been describing. Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. . . . It is after you have realized that there is a real Moral Law, and a Power behind the law, and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong with that Power—it is after all this, and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk. When you know you are sick, you will listen to the doctor. When you have realized that our position is nearly desperate you will begin to understand what the Christians are talking about. They offer an explanation of how we got into our present state of both hating goodness and loving it. They offer an explanation of how God can be this impersonal mind at the back of the Moral Law and yet also a Person. They tell you how the demands of this law, which you and I cannot meet, have been met on our behalf, how God Himself becomes a man to save man from the disapproval of God.[8]

The Maligned Sibling of Shame

Brief mention was already made of guilt's often maligned sibling shame, and we think it fitting to end this chapter by discussing it some more. Shame can pose a serious threat to the belief that God is good, that God loves each one of us, that we can be reconciled with God and others, and that we are valuable and worthwhile. Whereas guilt reveals that we have morally transgressed, shame has more to do with who we are, not just what we have done. And so it can be particularly damaging if we allow shame to detract from recognizing the value we have in God, which it can all too easily do. If we become convinced that we are useless, that our lives are pointless, that we as people lack value, it becomes exponentially harder to see ourselves as creations of God with infinite dignity and value and worth. It is for just such reasons that, for many, believers and unbelievers alike, the temptation is to think that all shame is bad—nothing but a toxic emotion. Guilt might be fine; we can ask forgiveness and such and get past it; but shame is thought to just saddle us with negative emotional baggage and so there is no good reason for it.

In some cases, this is obviously true. Victims of abuse may feel great shame over what happened to them, even though they did nothing wrong. That is undeserved shame, and the problem is not theirs. It is all of ours; we need to listen to such victims, not sideline them or silence them, giving

them a voice and really hearing them. We will give another example of undeserved shame in just a moment.

There is also deserved shame. If we do something shameful, we should feel shame—if we had abused that victim just discussed, for example. We don't mean to suggest that anyone should let shame decimate their sense of self or think of themselves as unredeemable, or that we should engage in the practice of shaming. That is different and is incompatible with loving our neighbors as ourselves. But if we don't feel at least some shame for doing something genuinely shameful, then we are being shameless, and that is a vice.

From Aristotle to Aquinas to so many others in the history of philosophy and theology, the capacity to feel shame has been thought to be a virtue, and the loss of the ability a vice. It is only more recently that as a society we have started to think otherwise, casting shame as categorically toxic and attempting to be rid of it altogether. Again, if the shame is undeserved, that is a problem we all need to address; but when shame is deserved, feeling the shame is a step to healing. So let's consider each form of shame in turn.

Undeserved Shame

Let's start with an example of undeserved shame. In 1981 Mister Rogers hosted ten-year-old Jeffrey Erlanger, who was in a wheelchair. They had originally met five years before, and Rogers remembered him and invited him to his *Neighborhood*. Rogers would later say that these unscripted ten minutes were his most memorable moment on television.[9] It is deeply moving, and if there is any doubt as to why, we might suggest it has to do, at least in part, with this matter of shame. Ours is sadly a society in which certain people (those who have been sexually abused, those with visible disabilities) carry a stigma and are often, for no fault of their own, riddled with a sense of shame—a loss of social standing and a resultant tendency to shrink and hide. It threatens their sense of humanity. The solution has to be communal—usually involving someone who has spare social capital conferring honor on them.[10]

Arguably that is exactly what makes those ten minutes of television so undeniably magical. It is a simply profound microcosm of the divine love that deigns to condescend to broken and marginalized people and, in the

process, exalts them, replacing shame with honor, beauty for ashes. As Mister Rogers did for Jeffrey—who was on stage years later to confer on Rogers his Lifetime Achievement Award—this is a means by which to make goodness attractive, which is part of our job description as Christians. It is a vitally important way to love God and neighbor.

Deserved Shame

As for an example of deserved shame, the pages of Scripture are replete with narratives of honor and shame, from Adam and Eve to the story of the prodigal son and lots in between. Readers probably know the story of the prodigal son, who insists on his inheritance ahead of time and engages in profligate spending and living, bringing shame on himself and an almost complete loss of social standing as a result. Finally, he repents and comes home, and the father, seeing him far off, comes running to him with a kiss and embrace, a ring for his finger and a great celebration. Here is a young man who did shame-worthy things. He felt shame, he deserved to, and he couldn't fix it on his own. He needed someone to confer on him the honor he had lost. His loving father did.

This gives us as believers a simply wonderful opportunity. All of us, whether we have social capital to spare or not, are in a position to remind those around us that each and every person is loved by the God of the universe. Indeed, Christianity teaches something about God that Aristotle missed; he wrote of how God attracts us, which is true. But more than that, God actively pursues us. The maker of heaven and earth is in a full sprint—robes and all—to embrace you, kiss you, put a ring on your finger, and throw a feast in your honor. Whatever the opinion of the company you keep, you are of immeasurable value to the One who matters most. You are so valuable that the God of the universe suffered the indignity of limited human form, betrayal, public humiliation, and naked crucifixion to rescue you not just from guilt but also from the shame of your condition, all to enjoy an eternal life of friendship and communion with you.[11]

If there is any doubt that this is what the life and work of Jesus was all about, recall the Old Testament passage that inaugurated his public ministry in Luke, from Isaiah 61:

> The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
> because the LORD has anointed me
> to proclaim good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
> to proclaim freedom for the captives
> and release from darkness for the prisoners,
> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
> and the day of vengeance of our God,
> to comfort all who mourn,
> and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
> to bestow on them a crown of beauty
> instead of ashes,
> the oil of joy
> instead of mourning,
> and a garment of praise
> instead of a spirit of despair. (61:1–3)

1 Robert Adams, "Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief," in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Delaney (University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 116-40.

2 Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography* (1793; repr., Henry Holt, 1916), chap. 9, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/20203/20203-h/20203-h.htm.

3 Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (John Lane, 1909), 24.

4 Clay Jones, *Why Does God Allow Evil? Compelling Answers for Life's Toughest Questions* (Harvest House, 2017), 62; Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (HarperCollins, 1992).

5 See Paul Copan, "Reinforcing the Moral Argument: Appealing to the Historical Impact of the Christian Faith," paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, November 19–21, 2014, San Diego.

6 Here's a smattering of scriptural references to the doctrine of sanctification: Rom. 8:16–18, 29–30; 1 Cor. 15:42–44; 2 Cor. 3:18; Phil. 3:20–21; Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 5:23–24; Heb. 2:10; 1 John 3:2.

7 A. E. Taylor, *Faith of a Moralist* (Macmillan, 1930), 421.

8 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), book 1, chap. 5.

[9] For a clip of the episode and also Rogers's comments about it, see "Mister Rogers' Beloved Neighbor Jeff Erlanger Inspires New 'Donkey Hodie' Character," PBS Wisconsin, April 14, 2025, https://pbswisconsin.org/article/mister-rogers-beloved-neighbor-jeff-erlanger-inspires-new-donkey-hodie-character/.

[10] See Gregg A. Ten Elshof's excellent *For Shame: Rediscovering the Virtues of a Maligned Emotion* (Eerdmans, 2021).

[11] Ten Elshof, *For Shame*, 142.

15

An Argument from Rationality

The fifth and last important piece of moral evidence to consider for now is the need for morality to be a fully rational enterprise. This rich topic provides the grounds for an argument from providence. In order for morality to be fully rational, or a rationally stable phenomenon, following its dictates needs to comport with a moral agent's ultimate interests.[1] Obviously, it is not always consistent with every aspect of what is in a moral agent's interests; in principle it could lead to premature death! But unless a case can be made that morality is ultimately in one's best interest—even if moral motivations require being motivated by something other than one's self-interest—arguably morality is less than fully rational in that specific sense. Such notions have a rich philosophical pedigree, so in order to conduct this discussion, we would like to delve a bit into the history of philosophical ethics.

Thomas Reid, Immanuel Kant, and the Coincidence Thesis

Laying the Groundwork

To lay the groundwork for a phenomenon called the "dualism of practical reason," which will be explained shortly, a bit of philosophical history is in order. We will forgo discussing in detail either Blaise Pascal or John Locke, except to point out one germane fact about each. Both recognized that making sense of morality requires consideration of the well-being of both

adherents and transgressors of the moral law. Pascal was famous for suggesting that it is a capital mistake to draw up our ethics without consideration of whether there is an afterlife, because he considered the answer to such a question most relevant to the import of ethics. In his *Pensées*, the great French mathematician and philosopher asserted that the immortality of the soul is so important that one must have lost all feeling not to care about knowing the facts of the matter.[2]

In Locke's case, he was well known for emphasizing the importance of rewards and punishments in moral motivation. In fact, he did this with such zeal and explicitness that he became vulnerable to the charge of equating moral motivation with the aim to produce a beneficial outcome, something more practical and prudential than anything intrinsically moral. In fairness to him, though, Locke thought that human beings can appreciate the intrinsic goodness of virtue, and even its appeal, but that this alone is inadequate to motivate virtuous behavior—especially when virtue is costly. To remedy this problem, on Locke's view, clear and explicit sanctions are needed to ensure that the virtuous course of action will always be the more attractive option. Here we can find the precursors to the notion that morality, to make full rational sense, should conduce to fulfillment and happiness. To retain its authority in our lives, morality requires the stability of cohering with ultimate happiness.

Coincidence Thesis and Thomas Reid

This philosophical notion about moral coherence has a long history. In various ways, it is operative in the eudaimonistic theories that practically equate the moral life with deep human flourishing. To give but a smattering of examples: Hints of the idea can be found in Augustine and Anselm, Butler and Berkeley. The Stoics and Epicureans both believed that there is an ultimate airtight connection between happiness and holiness. And organic, tight resonances between godly virtue and deep joy can be found peppered all throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition. Some philosophers eventually called this happiness/holiness conjunction (or, alternatively, the individual/communal or private/public good connection) the "coincidence thesis."[3] Generically expressed, it says that the moral life is, or is at least likely to be, good on the whole for the virtuous agent. Despite the

popularity of the conviction, though, what evidence is there to think that it is true?

Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid, for one, saw no way to defend the coincidence of virtue and well-being apart from supposing that the world is under benevolent administration. He did not take the eudaimonistic route but rather more rigidly distinguished virtue and well-being, but he then offered a possibility for their coincidence by appeal to a sovereign and good God superintending the world. He wrote, "While the world is under a wise and benevolent administration, it is impossible, that any man should, in the issue, be a loser by doing his duty. Every man, therefore, who believes in God, while he is careful to do his duty, may safely leave the care of his happiness to Him who made him."[4] Reid thought a commitment to the coincidence thesis, though virtuous, natural, and intuitive, goes beyond the evidence in some sense. Sidgwick would later come to the same conclusion.

Immanuel Kant

The next step that this dialectic requires invokes the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Reid took the coincidence thesis as a natural sort of hypothesis to believe but wondered if he was evidentially justified to believe it. Kant approached the matter similarly but differently.[5] To begin with, Kant is well known for writing that authentically moral actions require the right sort of motivation—namely, to be motivated by respect for the moral law. It is this intention animating our actions, rather than their consequences, that determines the moral status of an action. Morality is worth doing for its own sake. Kant notoriously downplayed the importance of consequences, counseling instead doing duty for duty's sake.

At the same time, however, Kant was not indifferent to the moral agent's well-being. He thought that human beings reside in both the noumenal and phenomenal realms—the world as it is and the world of appearances, respectively. If we were purely noumenal creatures, he argued, then commitment to virtue for its own sake and nothing else would be enough, but because we are also phenomenal creatures, we are hardwired to care about issues like our own happiness too. So, it is true that Kant thought that our moral motivations should not include our desire to be happy, but it is also true that he thought our desire to be happy is morally legitimate.

Kant thought that a rational moral being must necessarily will "the highest good," which consists of a world in which people are both morally good and happy and in which moral virtue is the condition for happiness. Kant was less concerned with questions of happiness per se than with questions of what makes us worthy of happiness. He held that a person cannot rationally will a virtuous life without believing that moral actions can successfully achieve such an end, which requires that the world be ordered in a certain way. This conviction is equivalent to belief in God, a moral being who is ultimately responsible for the character of the natural world. Kant would reject both the suggestion that happiness is irrelevant to the moral life and the suggestion that the world features a huge disconnect between virtue and happiness. Kant thought that theism provides the best explanation of how morality and rationality are not at odds. If the coincidence thesis were not true, morality would not really make full rational sense, but he thought the thesis is actually true.[6] With that, then, the stage is set for the dualism of practical reason—a new name for an old idea.

Henry Sidgwick and the Dualism of Practical Reason

In the great British philosopher Henry Sidgwick's magisterial *Methods of Ethics* can be found a discussion of what he called "the dualism of practical reason."[7] It resides in the vicinity of Scotus's distinction between affections for advantage or for justice and this recurring distinction between public and private goods. Sidgwick perceived that the problem, this dualism, poses a threat to the very heart of the ethical enterprise if it did not admit of an effective resolution. He thought that if it could not be resolved, it would show there to be a fundamental problem with ethics itself, at least understood as a rational endeavor. At worst, it reveals a sort of incoherence at the very foundation of morality. What morality dictates, on the one hand, and what rationality dictates, on the other, would be at odds.

Kant's and Reid's discussion of the coincidence thesis strongly bears on the discussion by Sidgwick, and the reasons should be obvious. The coincidence thesis advances the notion that virtue and well-being coincide, at least roughly and in the long term. Whereas Kant predicated a moral argument for God's existence on the truth of such a thesis, Reid was more

reticent, recognizing the difficulty of establishing the coincidence thesis. On this score, Sidgwick is a kindred spirit. He attempted to establish such coincidence on empirical grounds but finally despaired of the task. After having tried in vain to show the thesis to be true, he became convinced he was unable to do so. Among his reasons for skepticism are those aforementioned problematic times when there appears to be an intractable disconnect between happiness and virtue.

It is important, in order to avoid a misconstrual, to understand the sort of happiness that is relevant here. It is not happiness understood in a deflated or degraded sort of way. It is better to invoke the specter of what the Greeks were getting at with the idea of *eudaimonia*—a deep sense of fulfillment and flourishing. The experience of this sort of deep satisfaction is consistent with difficulties and hardships and even periods of profound sadness. Contemporary construals of happiness are not generally as effective at capturing this deeper sense of fulfillment that is at play in this conversation. The coincidence thesis, thus construed, pertains to whether living a moral life is consistent with the deepest joys of which human beings are capable. If morality were to preclude our highest satisfactions and deepest joy, this would pose a prohibitively high cost for being committed to morality. So much so, in fact, that it could be argued that there would be junctures at which the deliverances of morality and rationality diverge. This is to suggest that, in such cases, morality would be less than a fully rational enterprise.

This is the quandary in which Sidgwick found himself. Content with neither Reid's effort to look to theology for a possible resolution to the dualism, nor with Kant's predication of a discursive moral argument for God's existence using the coincidence thesis, Sidgwick was profoundly troubled by what he considered the conspicuous paucity of empirical evidence for its truth. In his landmark work in ethics, Sidgwick advanced a classical case for utilitarianism, a consequentialist normative ethical theory that considers as relevant more than just personal happiness. All who are affected by our actions should be taken into account, he thought. Utilitarianism, especially of the sort popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, seemed to provide grounds for universal benevolence and concern.

Sidgwick, however, did not think of self-love as an impediment to such universal love and benevolence. Proper regard for the self is required if we are to muster sufficient motivation to act for the general good. To find the inspiration and incentive to universal benevolence requires developing our sense of sympathy, deepening our insight, and working hard on ourselves and our habits. As a utilitarian, Sidgwick believed the ultimate good was "desirable consciousness." He wanted to show that rational hedonism (something like rational self-concern) is consistent with utilitarianism. He affirmed rational self-love while also arguing that such love is not the highest good, for it is too narrow, fleeting, and insecure to hold such lofty status. Universal happiness, though, is a worthy target for our highest aspirations.

Nevertheless, even though rational self-love is not sufficient to qualify as the ultimate good, its claims, Sidgwick thought, may still trump those of universal happiness. To demand a personal sacrifice for the sake of the greater good and the happiness of others creates a divide between human beings whose ultimate good is happiness and those for whom it is conformity to reason. Sidgwick struggled mightily with this tension or dualism. A person may choose to pay the price and sacrifice himself and his interests for the greater good and happiness of others, but Sidgwick finally concluded that it would be no less rational for someone to privilege his own happiness instead. On some occasions, we cannot do both, and it is precisely the conflict between these incompatible courses of action that generates what Sidgwick called "the dualism of practical reason." For a season, he failed to see the discrepancy between the natural end of seeking personal happiness and the end of duty to seek the general happiness, but eventually he came to see the tension as unavoidable and problematic in the extreme, bedeviling him for the rest of his career.

The issue he was struggling with was hardly new. Its precursors, articulated under subtly different guises, can be found in Anselm and Scotus, in Pascal and Locke, in Reid and Kant. It is an issue at the heart of the ethical enterprise, of interest both to theoreticians of ethics and to its practitioners. Is it rational to do our moral duty even when it is costly to do so? Is it equally permissible, morally speaking, to prioritize one's own happiness or benefit over the general good? Sidgwick's conclusion, after much reflection, is that one has a choice in some such cases of disconnect:

It is equally rational to assign primacy to one's own happiness (prudence) or to the greater good (rational benevolence). No problem even arises in cases of coincidence between self-love and benevolence, but such correspondence does not always obtain (at least in the short term). The lack of empirical confirmation of the coincidence thesis left him in this quandary and generated this dualism, which convinced him that it may well be impossible to make morality completely rational.

A Theistic Solution

Having laid out the dualism and its historical predecessors, let's examine a particular tradition to see what resources it might bring to bear on the problem. Sidgwick himself tipped his hat toward this tradition and acknowledged its possibilities to resolve the dilemma but finally decided not to move in that direction. The tradition is a theistic paradigm according to which a sovereign and good God ensures ultimate correspondence between (to put it pithily) happiness and holiness—less pithily, virtue and fulfillment, or public and private goods, or duty and self-interest, and the like. Recall, once more, that Reid and Kant both saw theistic implications where the coincidence thesis is involved.

Sidgwick's Resistance

Sidgwick also saw the possibility of a theistic resolution to the dualism of practical reason. In essence, a good God, classically construed, would give us reasons to think the coincidence thesis is true. The truth of the coincidence thesis, harmony between rational self-love and rational benevolence, would preclude the dualism of practical reason from coming about. Sidgwick could see that theism, thus construed, could render morality quite rationally stable after all.

Interestingly enough, however, Sidgwick did not opt for this solution. His agenda was one of trying to figure out whether ethics can be constructed independently of premises from theology or other sources. A nonnegotiable intuition, for him, as clear as any axiom of geometry, is that it is right and reasonable to treat others as we would like to be treated in similar

circumstances. But he could not find an analogous conviction inseparably connecting God with our moral convictions. Whereas Kant postulated God's existence on the basis of the coincidence thesis, Sidgwick refused to invoke a theistic effort to resolve the dualism of practical reason, leaving him with an unresolved problem. Incidentally, although Sidgwick thought the dualism intractable, he did not lose or counsel others to lose a commitment to morality but rather was led to consider lowering the demands of morality in order for it to remain a fully rational enterprise.

Theism's Answer

Rather than adjudicating between, say, Kant or Reid, on the one hand, and Sidgwick, on the other, we will explore more fully the solution that theism can offer. If we were to offer a so-called explanandum-driven investigation, we might, as Kant did, attempt to infer God's existence on the basis of the coincidence thesis, or at the least attempt to show that principled convictions about the coincidence thesis give theism more plausibility.

Instead, ours will be, less ambitiously, an explanans-driven exploration that delves into reasons for thinking that God, classically construed, would indeed, if he is real, resolve the dualism of practical reason, thus salvaging an important sense in which morality is rational. If our analysis is right, it would give, say, theistically minded business people compelling reasons to be willing, in their efforts at commerce, to do what they are convinced morality would dictate even if doing so appears to be costly. For if the coincidence thesis is right, such a course of action would be finally worth it and in one's self-interest after all, at least roughly and in the long term (if only posthumously).

To get the matter started, consider again Sidgwick's conclusion that acting in one's self-interest would be, in those problematic cases of seeming disconnect between egoistic and altruistic impulses, just as acceptable, proper, and rational as acting for the greater good. This view subsequently stirred the ire of certain commentators. Among those who challenged Sidgwick's view on this matter was British philosopher Hastings Rashdall. Rashdall had been Sidgwick's student, but he demurred from his mentor about the dualism, raising this question for Sidgwick: Isn't it the case that

the altruistic impulses we have are the *right* perspective? Isn't it the reasonable perspective rather than Sidgwick's claim that the self-regarding and altruistic perspectives are equally reasonable or rational? One's own pleasure and the general pleasure are not equally important or valuable. Or so Rashdall thought.

And not without some intuitive force. Many share Rashdall's concern that Sidgwick's conclusion does not ring true and that privileging one's own happiness or pleasure over larger other-regarding duties—including those of justice—would be wrong and somehow radically mistaken. For Rashdall, the dualism does not arise, not because of his convictions about the coincidence thesis but because of what he thought was the binding authority of morality. Other-regarding moral behaviors hold primacy over egoistic impulses. That said, though, Rashdall was not unmindful of the issue of the coincidence thesis, writing this: "But if goodness be the end and without which the highest happiness is incomplete, if goodness be of the essence of the highest happiness, then it is not inconceivable that the voluntary neglect of a lower good in the pursuit of a higher may be intrinsically necessary to the attainment of that completed state of being, of a life which shall embrace both these concepts of goodness and happiness which Modern Philosophy has been accustomed to separate—the 'Well-being' or [*eudaimonia*] of ancient Ethics."[8]

Interesting to point out at this juncture, then, are two theistic ways in which to argue for the coincidence thesis. One is the path of the eudaimonist, and there are echoes of that approach in Rashdall: Somehow inherent to right and good actions are features that benefit the moral actor and enable his deepest fulfillment.[9] The other is a more Kantian approach: A sovereign and good God ensures that the conceptually distinct realities of happiness and holiness ultimately cohere. We set to the side for now the possibility that the two accounts are reconcilable and able to be woven together into an integrated synthesis, as interesting as such an inquiry might be.

Rashdall's effort to forge a more intimate organic connection between virtue and happiness derives from his conviction that Sidgwick had failed to see that moral goodness—virtue and character as an element of the highest good—needs to be understood in an expansive enough way to include altruistic concerns and the rightness of promoting greater goods than those

purely or mainly for oneself. There is nothing wrong with taking issues of self-interest seriously, but to cross moral lines in doing so is problematic. In those cases of, say, doing justice or benefiting self, the former trumps. For those thus convinced, there is a hierarchy here: Morality holds primacy over self-interest. The price to pay to do the right thing may be costly, especially in the short term, but we can and should be willing to make such sacrifices and not trade integrity for, say, mammon. One's willingness to do so shows one's account of goodness is too small.[10]

Immanuel Kant did not strive to locate the source of moral authority in consequences, and certainly not in whether actions generate happiness. So far, then, Kant seems to sound like one who would insist that we should not care about our happiness at all. We should simply do our duty and aim for virtue, whether the result is happiness or not. Again, though, this analysis of Kant turns out to be not quite right, because Kant did after all recognize that fulfillment and happiness are important to human beings—since we are not merely spirit or mind; we also have bodies and various needs and cannot help but want to be happy. Again, it isn't that actions are right because they produce happiness; the relationship between virtue and joy is subtler than that. As Kant put it, we should become the sorts of persons who deserve to be happy.

If there is an ultimate disconnect between virtue and happiness, then morality might end up pointing in one direction (toward virtue), while rationality might push in a different direction (toward our happiness). Ultimately Kant believed there has to be an airtight connection between virtue and happiness if the enterprise of morality is to be a fully rational one. Our highest good—what is best for us—is the perfect blend of virtue and happiness. Reid, too, had been convinced that virtue and happiness need to coincide to make full rational sense of morality, and the solution he thought most obvious was a benevolent deity. As he put it, "While the world is under a wise and benevolent administration, it is impossible, that any man should, in the issue, be a loser by doing his duty. Every man, therefore, who believes in God, while he is careful to do his duty, may safely leave the care of his happiness to Him who made him."[11]

Subsequent to Kant, as discussed, Sidgwick's analysis tells a similar tale, except he saw so acute a problem that it threatened the very rationality of morality. Interestingly, he could see only one potential solution: theism. If a

providential God ensured ultimate correspondence between self-interest and altruism, between joy and virtue, then morality could be fully rationalized. Although he himself did not follow this line of evidence in his own life, we can still find the ingredients for an argument from providence in his discussion of the dualism of practical reason.

We have been approaching this question mainly from assuming theism and asking how it could underwrite the coincidence thesis and thus resolve the dualism of practical reason. It might be suggested that such an approach lacks apologetic value, but we disagree. To the extent that something like the coincidence thesis does indeed seem a natural stance to assume, the philosophical power of Anselmian theism to make sense of it and thereby resolve the dualism of practical reason that has so bedeviled ethicists, we would suggest, adds plausibility to theism. By itself it may not render theism more likely true than false, but it's a piece of the puzzle and to some extent makes theism more likely than it would otherwise be. It gives at least some reason to take theism more seriously, and for present purposes that will suffice. The next, and last, chapter in part 3 will better explain why this is so.

1 This may not be a sufficient condition, but arguably it is a necessary one.

2 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford University Press, 1995), 143.

3 To be clear, by "coincidence" one does not mean a chance occurrence but rather the coinciding of two seemingly independent realities.

4 Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, intro. B. Brody (MIT Press, 1969), 256. Reid agreed with Scotus that genuine virtue requires being committed to the moral life for its own sake, not for any reward. Nevertheless, he importantly saw no way to make sense of that commitment apart from holding that there is just and benevolent administration of the world, ensuring that an agent's virtue and well-being coincide, if not in this life, then in the next. As Reid put it, "Virtue is his [i.e., God's] care. Its votaries are under his protection & guardianship."

Reid, *Practical Ethics*, ed. K. Haakonssen (Princeton University Press, 1990), 120.

5 Kant discusses respect for the moral law prominently throughout his *Critique of Practical Reason* and his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*.

6 These reflections led Kant to formulate an argument for God's existence. Predicated on morality making full rational sense, theism provides the best or only explanation of how this can be so. So, following "Lotze's dictum" that says moral evidence can shed light on metaphysical matters, he inferred God's existence on the basis of the rationality of morality. John Hare calls this Kant's "argument from providence." Kant gave this argument in the dialectic of the *Critique of Practical Reason* and at the beginning of *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and the end of the *First* and *Third Critiques*.

7 Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Hackett, 1981), 404–508.

8 Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil: A Treatise on Moral Philosophy* (Clarendon, 1907), 1:61–62.

9 Of course, not all eudaimonists and natural lawyers are theistic in their orientation, though arguably the bulk of the tradition and most of its most vocal and significant adherents have been theists.

10 Mention of a hierarchy might remind readers of Scotus and Anselm, who, recall, argued that though there is nothing wrong with an affection for advantage, it should be subordinated to the affection for justice. Subordinating the affection for justice to the affection for advantage indicates an inordinate regard for self and an abdication of moral responsibilities.

11 Reid, *Active Powers of the Human Mind*, 256.

16

A Cumulative Case

By way of conclusion, putting all the pieces together produces a powerful fivefold cumulative moral case for God's existence. A couple of what we will call "target factors" shape different formulations of the moral argument. One of those factors is which specific moral phenomena receive focus, and the other is the manner in which the argument is couched. Our fivefold case focuses on five important moral phenomena, but that list is far from exhaustive. Narrowing the focus to these five pieces of evidence, though, gives the moral apologist a choice as to which to focus on, from just one to all five, or various combinations in between.

The other target factor is the decision of which logical form to use in constructing the argument. One might choose a deductive argument in which the conclusion follows logically from the premises or an abductive argument that focuses on which potential explanation of the various phenomena provides the best overall explanation. And there are other options besides, such as C. Stephen Evans's reformed epistemology approach that involves the way certain experiences naturally imbue one with an inclination to accept a particular conclusion. For example, a poignant sense of the value and infinite dignity of human persons might naturally function to form in someone the conviction that nothing less than bearing God's image is adequate to explain such a recognition.

In this chapter we offer an inductive moral argument on a broad evidential base. In general, we are inclined to think the logical form of the argument is less important than allowing oneself to feel the force of the evidence itself. Since we wish to construct a cumulative case, an inductive approach lends itself well to the project at hand. Before putting the case

together, allow us quickly to reiterate the distinction between a P-inductive argument and a C-inductive argument, borrowing from Richard Swinburne's analysis and explanation. First, an inductive argument does not aim to provide an airtight case between the evidence (expressed in the premises) and the conclusion. Rather, inductive arguments aim to heighten the likelihood that the conclusion is true. This can be done in numerous ways, one of which is particularly important for present purposes, as the distinction between P-inductive and C-inductive arguments will demonstrate.

A C-inductive argument raises the likelihood of the conclusion without rendering the conclusion, on the basis of the argument provided, likely true. It simply increases the likelihood to some degree or other. In this way, a C-inductive argument is not inordinately ambitious. A P-inductive argument results in making the conclusion of the argument likely true, more likely true than false. This is the more ambitious approach of these two forms of induction. We explained some of this in part 2, when discussing our case for moral realism, but we quickly review it here for those less familiar with the concepts.

Once again, it will be our intention to offer an inductive moral argument. What we intend to argue is that each of the five components in our approach increases the likelihood of theism to some degree, without needing to claim that any of them in isolation renders theism more likely true than false. Having argued for each of its individual parts, we then offer a cumulative-case moral argument incorporating all five elements. At the least, we contend, the combination of all five parts results in a yet stronger C-inductive moral argument and perhaps even treads the verge of offering a workable P-inductive argument that renders theism more likely true than false.

Now is the time that we pull all the pieces together to end up with our fivefold cumulative moral case for God's existence. Each piece individually makes theism more likely to some degree or other, and their collective power makes theism considerably more likely still. First, regarding moral values, more will be said about values per se in part 4, but consider the issue of human dignity and worth (not mere price). Almost all of us some of the time and some of us nearly all the time have a deep intuitive sense of the great value of human beings. John Hare writes that when we look at the

great movements toward the recognition of human value over the last sixty years, we will often find a religious motivation. “I am thinking of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, and the Lutherans in East Germany and the fall of the totalitarian state. Why is this? It is because of the nature of the God they worship.” Hare admits it is true that belonging to a community is very important, but the God of Abraham not only includes us in community but also pushes us out beyond community, to meet the needs of the poor and the marginalized who are the objects of God’s care just as much as we are. “God commands both the inclusion and the moving out.”[1] On a specifically Christian understanding, the value of human persons is found in the personhood of God. Moreover, persons are valuable not only in the aggregate; each and every person is of inestimable worth and dignity.

Second, if there are authoritative, objective, binding moral obligations, they cry out for adequate explanation. The challenge of providing such an explanation often leads to skepticism about their existence or to efforts to water them down or domesticate them in some fashion—reducing talk of moral authority to various reasons for behaving in certain ways, for example. The former is to explain morality away, and the latter is to fail to be attentive to the nature of moral evidence, such as its distinctive and overriding authority. Such authority requires explanation: Where does this moral clout come from? To rest content with affirming its existence without inquiring into its nature is to ask too few philosophical questions. We submit that theism, and Christian theism in particular, can most effectively provide its explanation. A loving, perfect God who commands, who knows us better than we know ourselves and made us in his image, who knows truly what is in our ultimate best interest, who desires the best for us, and who fashioned our telos provides a robust explanation of binding, objective, authoritative moral duties. Little wonder that Alvin Plantinga has said he thinks a moral argument on the basis of objective moral obligations is among the best pieces of natural theology on offer.[2]

So far the moral evidence considered is metaphysical in nature—objective moral values and duties. Next come epistemic considerations, the third prong in our argument. Whereas ontology is more top-down, epistemology is more bottom-up; still, there are reasons moral knowledge points to theism. An explanation of the cosmic coincidence between our

moral judgments and moral truth needs a proper account. Evolutionary debunking arguments of various stripes are one of the more recent widely discussed contenders for a potential defeater for moral knowledge. Because of the likes of Michael Ruse, Richard Joyce, and Sharon Street, such arguments have attracted much attention. Unsurprisingly, Ruse, Joyce, and Street, secularists all, end up abandoning moral realism and any moral knowledge predicated on it. Theism, however, potentially provides a defeater-defeater against the evolutionary debunking argument(s) (if not a defeater-deflector) by rejecting the naturalistic origins thesis as a gratuitous theological add-on to which evolution need not be attached. This carves out room for evolution to be a divinely guided process that may well ensure a correspondence between moral truth and at least our most nonnegotiable moral convictions. Theism holds the promise of closing that explanatory gap.[3]

After a consideration of metaphysical and epistemic matters, we extend our moral argument by appeal to two aspects of Kantian moral faith. So, fourth, another gap needs closing: the performative gap between the best we can do and what morality requires. This is the first aspect of Kantian moral faith, and John Hare most recently has written the most about it. Christianity teaches that our highest ethical yearning can be satisfied. God can replace our heart of stone with a heart of flesh, effecting a revolution of the will and solving "Spener's problem" by making us not just *better* people but *new* people.[4] He can allow Anselm's affection for justice to assume primacy over the affection for advantage, can heal the "dear self," and replace the evil maxim with the good one. He can save us to the uttermost and make all things new, transforming us into the people he intended us to be, holy as he is holy.

Christianity not only speaks of forgiveness, change, and ultimate perfection in its three stages of salvation but also has an established historical track record of effecting social holiness. Even outspoken atheist Jürgen Habermas, in his later work, acknowledged the inescapable and profound debt human rights discourse today owes to the biblical worldview:

> Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than just a precursor or a catalyst. Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and a social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the

> Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.[5]

Fifth—and the second aspect of Kantian moral faith—theism offers resources for morality to be a fully rational enterprise. It can resolve the dualism of practical reason, reconciling happiness and holiness. What seems an irremediable tension can be quite reconciled on theism, Christian theism in particular. Radical transformation is available in a robust, vibrant, saving relationship with God, and it is there that we also find our deepest joy, the profoundest satisfactions for which we were made. God renders us worthy of happiness by his grace, making justice and righteousness dance and happiness and holiness embrace.

In each instance, theism provides a compelling, robust explanation of important moral phenomena without watering the evidence down, neither domesticating nor deflating it. Each piece individually makes theism more likely to some degree or other, and their collective power makes theism considerably more likely still. Mention of cumulative cases is important because it's a reminder that the moral argument, even if it itself can be given in the form of a cumulative case, remains just one weapon in the arsenal of the natural theologian. A broader cumulative case for God's existence can and has been made; appeals to cosmological, ontological, and teleological arguments are all possible, among others. The moral argument is just one piece of a bigger puzzle, but we submit that it deserves an important place at the table. Our hope is that this book helps familiarize readers with its salient contours and a taste of its rich history, firm foundations, and contemporary formulations.

1 John E. Hare, *God's Command* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 307–8.

2 "Afterword: Trent Dougherty and Alvin Plantinga: An Interview on Faith and Reason," in *Two Dozen (Or So) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project*, ed. Jerry L. Walls and Trent Dougherty (Oxford University Press, 2018), 447.

[3] It bears repeating that Plantinga's EAAN provides a defeater of belief in the conjunction of evolution and naturalism.

[4] "Spener's Problem" is the challenge to become not merely better people but new people; it is derived from the seventeenth-century Lutheran pietist Philipp Jakob Spener.

[5] Jürgen Habermas, *Time of Transitions*, ed. and trans. Ciaran Cronin and Max Pensky (Polity, 2006), 150–51. Tom Holland's *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (Basic Books, 2019) also chronicles many of the morally beneficial results of Christianity.

PART 4

On Naturalism and Platonism

In the final section of the book, we turn our attention to naturalism and Platonism. The discussion of naturalism is largely a prelude to the discussion of atheistic Platonism in the final chapter. We consider such Platonism to be the main rival to theistic metaethics. So after disambiguating what's meant by "naturalism" in chapter 17, we turn to Platonism, especially the view of Erik Wielenberg, in the final chapter. It's just one version of secular nonnatural ethics, of course, and it's a view that resonates with our own in important ways; nevertheless, we hope that the discussion identifies several central concerns about atheistic Platonism that help show that the explanation that theism provides is a better one.

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Naturalism

So far in our analysis we have largely set to the side competing realist accounts. Earlier we touched on naturalist accounts and briefly discussed the challenges they face to make sense of normativity, moral or otherwise, and applied the metaphysical reading of the open question argument. Much more could be said about naturalistic approaches, and if we were less encumbered by space constraints, we could elaborate on them some more. We will not pursue that discussion here, though, except to make a few important preliminary points about the notion of naturalism. As it happens, naturalism is a notion riddled with potential ambiguity. After discussing it, we will turn our attention to atheistic moral Platonism in the final chapter.

What Is Natural?

To begin with, naturalism can be construed in a narrow or strict way, on the one hand, or in a more expansive and broad fashion, on the other. On a strict view, the physical world is all there is; the only legitimate way to come to grasp reality is by means of the sciences, especially the natural sciences; and the like. When *we* speak of naturalistic ethics, we usually tend to mean the strict view: an ethical view based on taking naturalism so understood as true. We find this naturalistic construal of reality particularly challenged when it comes to making good enough sense of morality realistically construed, at least without problematically watering it down considerably. This is likely why so many variants of naturalistic ethics end up being antirealist in one way or another.[1] That said, there is no shortage of

strict naturalists who think that their view is reconcilable with some variant of moral realism.

Naturalism understood less strictly opens up quite a number of fertile possibilities. Aristotle and Aquinas are examples of adherents of this view of naturalism, which some have called “classical naturalism.” This is an appreciably different understanding of the natural order, one rife with rich metaphysical and teleological dimensions, including natural substances possessing real essences, “essences with built-in ends, proper functions, purposes, goals, and objective conditions of flourishing.”[2] Here the notion of what is “natural” is contrasted less with supernaturalism than with something more like artificiality. Normativity finds a more congenial home in such an environment rather than being the arguably exotic notion it is in a narrowly naturalistic world bereft of inherent teleology and the like.[3]

Natural law is a rich ethical tradition that accords primacy to and carves out space for essences, teleology, and normativity; its appeal to what is “natural” goes well beyond simply what is found in naturalism narrowly construed. Historically most natural lawyers were theists, though more recently a number of advocates of natural law have been less open to theism. It makes good sense, though, that there was a strong historical link between natural law, with its rich ontology, and a theistic worldview. There is much about these traditions that dovetails and resonates. Little wonder that Thomists tend to be committed moral realists and Thomistic natural lawyers tend to be committed to theism.

Natural Law

Natural law ethics tends to explore questions of moral ontology by asking what it takes to live a full human life. Goods like meaningful work, strong friendships, certain religious experiences, and the like are often cited as examples of what leads to a rich and fulfilling human life. Our own approach remains quite open to aspects of such an approach, but it’s also of pressing importance to ask this additional question: Is it good to be a human being?[4] This question goes beyond what it takes to live a life of flourishing as a human being; it’s a question about the basic value of human life. Recall that this was the topic of the second half of chapter 11, the discussion

pertaining to human value and dignity. We have argued that theistic resources are eminently able to account for such human value.

Besides the ambiguity of what is "natural," some Thomists, perhaps owing to the historical tensions between natural law and voluntarism (discussed in part 1), think there is an intractable tension between moral apologetics and natural law. We disagree. A variety of theistic ethicists—from divine command theorists to natural lawyers and lots in between—can and do apprehend the force of the moral argument without agreeing on all the metaethical details of the sense in which morality is dependent on God.[5] Several of those disparate accounts, we suspect, contain important kernels of truth. We gravitate to our own accounts, but moral apologists can approach this subject matter from several possible angles.

Why do we characterize our own approach as nonnaturalist, despite sharing in common with theistic natural lawyers such commitments as normativity and teleology that find a natural home in a theistic world? Mainly because God is not part of the natural world. By "nonnaturalism" we don't mean "unnatural," of course, since it's consistent with everything found in the natural world, and indeed there are aspects of the natural world that arguably point to God (human consciousness, design, etc.). The natural world alone, though, does not contain all that there is. Neither is God himself, the creator of the natural world, part of the world, nor, we submit, are moral truths explained by the natural world alone.

Movement Toward Nonnaturalism

Interestingly enough, some of the leading secular metaethicists today are in wholehearted agreement on this score. They agree with us, and we with them, that the moral evidence points to a nonnatural source. They and we are in agreement about error theory, expressivism, constructivism, moral realism, and even nonnaturalism. We are thinking of Platonists in particular here. As George Mavrodes once said of Plato, "The idea of the Good seems to play a metaphysical role in his thought. It is somehow fundamental to what is as well as to what ought to be, much more fundamental to reality than are the atoms. A Platonic man, therefore, who sets himself to live in accordance with the Good aligns himself with what is deepest and most

basic in existence. Or to put it another way, we might say that whatever values a Platonic world imposes on a man are values to which the Platonic world itself is committed, through and through."[6]

Mavrodes contrasted a Platonic world with a strictly naturalistic world of the sort believed in by Bertrand Russell. But not every secularist believes in such strict naturalism; some among them are a sort of Platonist. And such secular, or atheistic, Platonists can claim to believe in moral realism in a quite strong sense. This sort of realist doesn't embrace moral skepticism or moral nihilism or moral expressivism or even a merely instrumental sense of moral oughtness such as we might find among the constructivists. Rather, they can claim to believe in nonnatural moral facts and categorical imperatives, the sort of objectivity combined with prescriptivity that Mackie thought irremediably odd. They can, in other words, affirm something much like the sort of moral realism we argued for in part 2 and yet deny that such moral facts, if they exist, serve as evidence for God's existence.

With respect to such secular nonnatural moral realists, therefore, it isn't until the final fork in the road, as it were—the distinction between something like (atheistic) Platonism and something like theism—that our paths at last diverge. This is a point worth emphasizing, because on, say, the matter of whether there are authoritative moral duties, we are in complete agreement. They are our allies on such a score, and on every score, right up until the final showdown between Platonism and theism.[7] What we intend to do in the following chapter is primarily to examine one example of atheistic moral Platonism (AMP), that of Erik Wielenberg. Our view shares much in common with his, as noted—in numerous respects he's a kindred spirit on ethics and metaethics—but this is an appropriate juncture to highlight one significant difference, for we have indeed arrived at that aforementioned final fork in the road.

As a methodological matter, in this volume we have intentionally put off this aspect of the discussion until now in order to focus on what we consider the particular strengths of a theistic account in explaining various moral phenomena. That discussion culminated in the cumulative case we constructed in the final chapter of part 3. Such a cumulative case can be couched in several different ways—from deductive to abductive accounts, from inductive to "natural sign" approaches. When we move in the

abductive direction, we speak in terms of what the “best explanation” is of various moral phenomena in question. Making the case for a best explanation requires arguing that one explanation is better than all the alternatives. This is a huge task, beyond what we can do in short compass. Usually, in conversations on this topic, though, the salient alternatives to a theistic hypothesis get narrowed down to one or two, making the dialogue manageable.

So, what we intend to do in the next chapter is to consider mainly one important nonnatural alternative to the theistic explanation. It is a view that’s rightly received quite a bit of attention in recent years, and it is well worth careful consideration: Wielenberg’s theory of nontheistic Platonism that he calls godless normative realism (GNR). Obviously, we cannot survey all of that literature here, but we’ll do our best to briefly encapsulate several of our primary concerns. We could have incorporated discussion of Wielenberg within the body of part 3, but we chose to put it off until now, thinking this was a tidy division of labor that could bring focus to our respective discussions. Of course, we realize the limitations in this analysis; even if we are right that theism provides a better explanation than does Wielenberg’s view, more argument would be needed to take on other secular accounts. Once again, our argument at this point is necessarily partial, but taking on such a worthy interlocutor as Wielenberg can provide a model of how to carry on such conversations.

Before giving his GNR our careful attention, we should mention that there are, of course, additional secular and nonnaturalistic accounts of morality that try to salvage a strong sense of moral realism. We are simply unable to take them all on here, though we can point readers to other sources where criticisms are launched against them.[8] What we aim to do here is delimit the discussion simply to certain aspects of Wielenberg’s account and offer a model of how such a view, while to be applauded for its innovations, can be subjected to criticism. Once more our treatment is meant as more of a discussion starter than a definitive treatment of Wielenberg, much less of any and all secular realist theories of ethics or metaethics.

[1] It is also possible to lay out a naturalistic ethic without presupposing naturalism strictly understood. Suppose a theist found satisfactory some version of naturalistic ethics. He finds, say, something like Cornell realism to suffice to account for the relevant moral phenomena. His ethical theory would be naturalistic, even though he himself is not a strict naturalist.

[2] As David A. Horner and J. P. Moreland put it in *Metaphysics: A Short Companion* (B&H Academic, 2024), 111–12.

[3] Although he is no natural lawyer, recall Olson's inclusion of supernaturalism among "naturalist" accounts in his effort not to beg questions against theistic ethics. Among projects that one of us (Baggett) hopes to undertake at a later date is to chronicle an array of ways in which "natural" is variously construed.

[4] Peter Geach famously distinguished between attributive and predicative goodness. Attributive goodness ascriptions look like this: "This is a good car." This is the notion of goodness of its kind. Predicative goodness ascriptions appeal to a broader conception of goodness, something more like Platonic conceptions; an example: "This person is good." Geach was skeptical that attributive ascriptions are distinct from predicative ones. We demur and, indeed, push the distinction even further by citing a case like this: "Is it good to be a human being?" This question not only appeals to a wider conception of goodness but also encompasses the yet broader issue of human value. See Peter Geach, "Good and Evil," *Analysis* 17, no. 2 (1956): 33–42.

[5] Frank Beckwith, in the forthcoming Oxford University Press collection edited by David Baggett and John Hare, has written a chapter arguing for the consistency of natural law with a moral argument for God's existence, contra those natural lawyers who are skeptical of it. Part of the appeal of moral arguments for God's existence is that they need not all agree on the fine-grained details of metaethics.

[6] George Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 2nd ed., ed. Louis P. Pojman (Wadsworth, 1995), 587.

[7] Michael Huemer offers a unique taxonomy of metaethics that has the practical result of vitiating this point, but we think that he mistakenly

underestimates the radical difference between human mind- and divine mind-dependence.

[8] Dale Kratt's book *A Secular Critique of Secular Moral Nonnaturalism* (Springer, forthcoming) is worth reading for a critique not just of Wielenberg but of a whole range of secular metaethicists, as is Steve Parrish's yet-to-be-published *The Nature of Moral Necessity*. In *Philosophia Christi* 20, no. 2 (2018), Adam Lloyd Johnson, William Lane Craig, Tyler Dalton McNab, and Mark C. Murphy all criticize Wielenberg's book *Robust Ethics*, with Wielenberg giving a response to each of his critics. See Johnson, "Introduction to the American Academy of Religion Form on Erik Wielenberg's Robust Ethics"; Craig, "Erik Wielenberg's Metaphysics of Morals"; McNabb, "Wile E. Coyote and the Craggy Rocks Below: The Perils of Godless Ethics"; Murphy, "No Creaturely Intrinsic Value"; Johnson, "Fortifying the Petard: A Response to One of Erik Wielenberg's Criticisms of the Divine Command Theory"; and Wielenberg, "Reply to Craig, Murphy, McNabb, and Johnson."

18

Nontheistic Moral Platonism

Wielenberg's Godless Normative Realism

Erik Wielenberg's nontheistic account is one of several secular efforts to underwrite strong moral realism in a nonnatural way without appealing to theism.[1] Obviously we cannot discuss any and every secular ethicist, so why choose Wielenberg? One important reason is that he, unlike many secular ethicists, interacts extensively with Christian thinkers. We respect his work and think it worthy of serious consideration. A great many other secular ethicists settle for shortcuts, appealing to dogmatism or superficial analyses. Wielenberg is not the only exception, of course—David Enoch, Russ Shafer-Landau, and others come to mind—but he is definitely one of the most thoughtful secular metaethicists whose work demonstrates that he takes these questions with great seriousness. If we have time to discuss only one major thinker from the ranks of secular ethicists, he's as good a choice as any.

Wielenberg's views are already pretty well known, so we will offer just a brief recap of their salient features and then delve into a comparative analysis of his approach and the theistic analysis to which we're drawn. His central aim in his excellent book *Robust Ethics* is to defend the plausibility of a robust brand of moral realism without appealing to God or any exotic cognitive faculties. As its name suggests, his godless normative realism (GNR) involves a threefold claim. First, it is a moral realism; that is to say, it affirms the objectivity of moral values and duties. Second, it is a godless realism, not in the sense of being atheistic but in the sense that God plays no role in the theory. Third, it is a version of normative ethics—that is to

say, it seeks to ground moral duties in our having moral reasons to do things.

We will now use Wielenberg as a paradigmatic example of nontheistic Platonism and contrast it with a theistic metaethic. At this point we set aside our many points of agreement and resonance with Wielenberg and focus instead on ways that we think a theistic approach is the stronger alternative. We identify six reasons for thinking so. Platonism is a fascinating account of strong ethical realism, but it's unclear that it actually accomplishes much if any work of explaining. Often it seems more like an elaborate construction, which is what George Mavrodes was driving at when he wrote that Platonism, despite its virtues, doesn't really explain anything.[2] Moreover, the account it proposes seems subject, on reflection, to numerous criticisms. What we intend to do here is contrast Platonism with theism in an effort to see which, of these two options, is the more hopeful possibility. We aim to identify six ways in which theism seems to provide the better explanation less susceptible to criticism, the collective force of which we find to be quite powerful and persuasive.[3]

Personalist Dimensions

First, the nature of morality is ineliminably personalist, a tenacious feature of morality that makes theism better adapted to serve as its foundation than Platonism. *Platonism is essentially impersonal, involving brute facts that exist apart from persons or even any consciousness to apprehend them. Theism, in contrast, is personal to the core*. There is perhaps no more fundamental point of divergence between (secular) Platonism and theism than the fact that Platonism is ultimately impersonal, whereas theism is essentially personal. This radical difference puts Platonism, right from the start, in a precarious position with respect to explaining morality. By its nature, morality is person-related.

Many atheistic ethicists reject wholesale the notion that objective moral values and duties are anchored in some transcendent ground, but Wielenberg's robust moral realism is an exception. It affirms that objective moral values and duties do exist and are not dependent on evolution or

human opinion, but he insists that they are not grounded in God. Indeed, moral values have no further foundation. They just exist.

But what does it mean to say, for example, that the moral value Justice just exists? It's hard to know what to make of this. It is clear what is meant when it is said that a *person* is just; but it is bewildering when it is said that, in the absence of any people, Justice itself exists. Moral values seem to exist as properties of persons, not as mere abstractions—or at any rate, it is hard to know what it is for a moral value to exist as a mere abstraction. Nontheistic moral Platonists seem to lack any adequate foundation in reality for moral values but rather leave them floating in an unintelligible way.

Or consider propositions, which, if they exist, as Platonists affirm, are abstract objects that are by their nature *intentional*. That is, they are *about* something if that something can be clearly denoted. Propositions about ethics are about, say, moral rights and wrongs. How do such propositions exhibit intentionality apart from minds? It seems absurd to say that mind-correlative entities, ones that have mental characteristics, exist independently of minds. Even more far-fetched is the notion that there are intrinsically impersonal entities that are about and apply to persons.[4] We submit that the failure of Platonism as a moral theory owes in no small part to its impersonal dimension, in contrast to the thoroughly personalist nature of theism, which can justify the existence of ethical realism.

Theism, at least the perfect-being theology characteristic of Robert Adams's theistic Platonism, entails the personhood of God. A perfect, maximally great being, a loving and creative personal God, is, as we shall see below, an eminently worthy explanatory ultimate and, moreover, makes good sense of both the emergence of persons and God's care for the moral and spiritual health of his creations. In patent contrast, why would an impersonal reality constituted by abstract entities care about us and be worthy of our emulation? Since personal beings to whom ethics apply are unplanned, anomalous interlopers, in a naturalistic universe, why would there be laws governing their behavior? Why would either the universe or the collection of abstract objects care about such things?[5]

We have indeed argued in this book that "God is good" is true in the sense of both identity and predication. God is the best candidate for the good itself; it makes most sense to attribute the property of goodness to persons. Recall that this was Sorley's point: The explanatory ultimate is

plausibly personal. Once more the personalist nature of theism enables us to say that ultimate reality—God, not mere abstracta—is actually itself good, indeed, maximally so. God is, to our thinking, the good itself. We stand in the long tradition according to which God himself is the ultimate good and thus the perfect archetype of the good. The ultimate good is not an abstract principle that is itself neither good nor capable of love but rather Someone who is personal through and through, who attracts us to himself, deigns to pursue us, and extends his overtures of love to us all.

Explanatory Depth

One important reason adduced by some philosophers for thinking that the moral argument today is flagging is the persuasive force of a claim that Wielenberg makes about brute facts. While admitting that his theory makes appeal to such facts, he insists that theists are in the same proverbial boat, needing to make appeal to brute facts of their own. Moreover, these commentators say, since Wielenberg is as entitled to his own brute facts as theists are to theirs, the explanatory edge that theism might be thought to hold evaporates.

Why does Wielenberg claim that Platonism and theism are on a par or in the same epistemic boat in at least this respect that both make appeal to brute facts? He points out that Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne affirm that God's existence is a brute fact, making, he thinks, their theism and his own moral realism equally and ultimately brute. Here is how Wielenberg puts it: "On both types of views [theistic and atheistic], the bottom floor of objective morality rests ultimately on nothing."[6] On his view, the reasons that reality is committed to morality derive from the brute necessity attaching to certain Platonic moral propositions. But the persuasiveness of this claim is diminished once we delve into questions regarding explanatory depth and explanatory ultimates.

We share a deep-seated conviction that explanatory depth is a theoretical virtue in ethics, just as it is in physics or mathematics.[7] A theory that provides an explanation or grounding of ethical principles is superior to one that adopts a "shopping list" approach, whereby one simply helps oneself to the principles one needs without any attempt at explanation. Our claim is

precisely that theism has the explanatory resources that atheism lacks to account for the objectivity of moral values and duties. Here we will address the comparative explanatory adequacy of Platonism and theism regarding objective moral values; later we'll address their comparative explanatory adequacy regarding objective moral duties under the heading "Moral Authority."

"One of the things we want our moral theory to help us to understand," Kagan says, "is how there can even be a moral realm, and what sort of objective status it has."[8] One of the features of godless normative realism that makes it so challenging and interesting is that it seems to take this need for explanation very seriously. Platonism is a worthy competitor to theism in providing a metaphysical grounding for the objectivity of moral values.

In the opening section of his book *Robust Ethics*, titled "Metaphysics of Morals," Wielenberg espouses a robust moral Platonism as the metaphysical foundation for his ethical theory.[9] His view is akin to mathematical Platonism, which holds that in addition to the world of concrete objects, there exists a transcendent realm of immaterial, causally effete, abstract objects, like numbers, sets, and other mathematical entities. Most of us think that such entities have at most a sort of conceptual reality, but for the Platonist these objects are objectively real. Wielenberg holds that moral values are similarly abstract objects of some sort existing independently of human beings.[10] When the right physical situations occur in the world, these abstract objects supervene on the situations. For example, the abstract object *goodness* supervenes on two persons' loving each other, so that their loving each other is objectively good.

Platonism is, however, a metaphysical view that is so extravagant that it makes theism—which itself involves hefty metaphysical commitments!—look modest by comparison. The prominent metaphysician Peter van Inwagen explains,

> The Platonist must think of objects, of what there is, as falling into two exclusive and exhaustive categories, the abstract and the concrete. If *x* falls into one of these categories and *y* into the other, then no two things could be more different than *x* and *y*. . . . The differences between God and this pen pale into insignificance when they are compared with the differences between this pen and the number 4; indeed, the number seems no more like the pen than like God. The difference between *any* abstract object and *any* concrete object would seem to be the maximum difference any two objects could display.[11]

Given this strange bifurcation of reality into these two causally unconnected domains, muses van Inwagen, it would be much more credible to suppose that one of the categories is empty. But concrete objects are indisputably real and well understood, in contrast to abstract objects. So, van Inwagen maintains, the presumption should be that abstract objects do not exist. Nominalism of some sort is thus the default position. Indeed, van Inwagen believes that "one should not believe in abstract objects unless one feels rationally compelled by some weighty consideration or argument. . . . A philosopher should wish not to be a Platonist if it's rationally possible for the informed philosopher not to be a Platonist."[12]

Wielenberg acknowledges that he has no rationally compelling arguments for moral Platonism, not to mention the objectivity of moral values.[13] He thus cannot overcome the presumption against Platonism and, hence, against godless normative realism. The theist, by contrast, faces no such obstacle because he grounds moral values in a concrete object (namely, God) and so need not be committed to a realm of abstract objects.[14] The theist thus has a more plausible explanatory ultimate.

Moreover, even given the truth of moral Platonism, GNR faces a number of formidable objections in its account of the objectivity of moral values that diminish its explanatory power. For example, GNR's account of the supervenience of abstract moral properties on physical situations seems unintelligible. How is it that these abstract objects like *goodness* or *badness* come to be attached to physical situations? Wielenberg recognizes that it would be implausible to say that this just happens, as if by magic.[15] Rather, he claims that the physical objects *cause* the abstract objects to supervene on physical situations.[16] This is not ordinary supervenience; it's been rightly called "superdupervenience"![17] Unfortunately, this superdupervenience is utterly mysterious. Ask yourself: How can a physical object somehow reach out and causally connect to a transcendent, causally isolated, abstract object?

Ironically, in order to make his claim plausible Wielenberg has to appeal to theism as an analogy to his view. He writes, "A paradigmatic example of the sort of robust causation that I have in mind is the causal relation that many theists take to hold between a state of affairs being divinely willed and the obtaining of that state of affairs. . . . Theists typically maintain that if God wills that p, this necessarily brings it about that p obtains. . . . I

propose . . . to construe the making relation involved in . . . supervenience as this sort of robust causation."[18]

Unfortunately, this analogy fails precisely because neither God nor the universe is an abstract object. God and the universe are concrete objects endowed with causal powers and dispositions, which can therefore be causally related to one another. But how physical objects can be causally connected to abstract objects is wholly obscure.

Moreover, we may ask, how do these physical situations "know" *which* abstract objects to instantiate? What if instead of picking out moral *goodness*, some physical situation might pick out moral *badness*? Indeed, what if it picks out some other abstract object like √2 to instantiate, so that two people's loving each other has the property of *being √2* instead of *being good*? Wielenberg says that while some moral properties are caused necessarily to supervene on certain physical situations, in other cases they are only contingently caused to supervene.[19] So why does this happen?

Again, ironically, Wielenberg turns to theism in order to explicate his position. He invites us to consider the doctrine of divine conservation: "According to that doctrine, God not only brings all contingent things into existence; He also sustains or keeps them in existence for each moment that they exist. . . . There is a robust causal relation between divine willing and every contingent thing at each moment of its existence. One way of construing my proposal, then, is as a doctrine of *non-moral conservation*: whatever moral properties are instantiated are conserved or sustained by various underlying non-moral properties via a robust causal relation that holds between the relevant non-moral and moral properties."[20]

But once again, the analogy with theism fails, for God is a personal agent who freely chooses to sustain in being certain contingent things. By contrast, Wielenberg says that his proposal "should . . . not be understood as ascribing *agency* to non-moral properties."[21] But without agency how can these physical situations correctly select the right moral states of affairs to instantiate? The problem is not just that the holding of this causal relation between nonmoral and moral states of affairs is, by Wielenberg's own admission, inexplicable.[22] The problem is that Wielenberg's view, which is supposed to be consistent with scientific naturalism, imputes to physical objects causal powers that are mysterious and completely unknown to contemporary physics. It is, in fact, a sort of voodoo metaphysics.

DCT, on Adams's (and our) view, takes God to be the paradigm of moral goodness. The theory's explanatory ultimate is more satisfying than Wielenberg's. First, it does not stop explanation prematurely but stops only when we have reached the metaphysically ultimate being, a self-existent, metaphysically necessary being from whom all remaining reality derives and beyond which one cannot go. Second, God's being the greatest possible being makes God a particularly apt explanatory stopping point.

Moral Knowledge

Third is the important issue of moral knowledge. Nontheistic moral Platonism actually seems to render moral knowledge quite improbable. This is a vital concern for Wielenberg's theory, for part 4 of his book, "Answering the Evolutionary Debunkers," which is devoted to moral epistemology, tackles evolutionary debunking arguments against moral knowledge. Wielenberg's account of moral knowledge seems vulnerable to Alvin Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism (EAAN).[23]

Plantinga argues that naturalism is self-defeating because if our cognitive faculties have evolved by naturalistic processes, they are aimed not at truth but at survival, and so they cannot be relied on to produce true beliefs. This is especially evident on Wielenberg's physicalist anthropology, since our mental states have absolutely no effect on our brain states. Thus, the content of our beliefs is irrelevant to our survivability. But if we cannot rely on our cognitive faculties to produce true beliefs, then the belief in naturalism is itself undermined, since it has been produced by those very cognitive faculties.

We can apply Plantinga's argument to our moral beliefs as follows:

1. The probability that our cognitive faculties are reliable, given naturalism and evolution, is low.
2. If someone believes in naturalism and evolution and sees that, therefore, the probability of his cognitive faculties' being reliable is low, then he has a defeater for the belief that his cognitive faculties are reliable.

3. If someone has a defeater for the belief that his cognitive faculties are reliable, then he has a defeater for any belief produced by his cognitive faculties (including his moral beliefs).
4. Therefore, if someone believes in naturalism and evolution and sees that, therefore, the probability of his cognitive faculties' being reliable is low, then he has a defeater for the reliability of his moral beliefs.

Because our moral beliefs have been produced by faculties aimed at survival, not truth, we can have no confidence that our moral beliefs are true.

As Andrew Moon explains, the crucial question in assessing Plantinga's argument is, "Which beliefs may one use to respond to a potential defeater?"[24] The naturalist might think that he can offer a defeater-defeater for Plantinga's defeater of the reliability of the naturalist's cognitive faculties. Unfortunately, Moon explains, the naturalist, while engaging in such reasoning, would be appealing to the very beliefs that he already has reason to distrust. In other words, any potential defeater-defeater will itself already be defeated by the original defeater of the reliability of one's cognitive faculties. Therefore, the naturalist (if he is a physicalist) cannot block defeat by appeal to a defeater-defeater, since the naturalist's beliefs are already defeated.

Rather, what the naturalist needs is what Plantinga calls a defeater-deflector. While a defeater-defeater assumes that some belief is a defeater that must in turn be defeated, a defeater-deflector prevents the belief from being a defeater in the first place.[25] Figuring out exactly which beliefs can function as defeater-deflectors is difficult and constitutes an unresolved challenge for Wielenberg's view that he needs to address.

The solution to EAAN is to deny not evolution but naturalism. On theism God can supervise the evolutionary process in such a way as to guarantee the fundamental reliability of our cognitive faculties. Since Wielenberg, by contrast, is committed to naturalism in the relevantly problematic sense, as well as evolution, he has a defeater for the reliability of his moral beliefs. GNR thus seems saddled with an insuperable objection with respect to moral knowledge. If Plantinga is right, then moral knowledge is impossible for the evolutionary naturalist.[26]

Kantian Moral Faith

Fourth, whereas Platonism doesn't hold promise to help resolve either aspect of Kantian moral faith, theism handily addresses both of its aspects. Recall that the first aspect of such moral faith involves the performative matter of living up to the moral law. Since the moral law is beyond unaided human capacities to satisfy, the deontic principle that *ought implies can* still relevantly applies if divine assistance is figured into the equation. Indeed, God's grace can account for the satisfaction of all three deep moral existential human needs of forgiveness, moral transformation, and ultimate perfection. This is where tapping into the distinctive strengths of Christian theology can greatly help, for these three moral needs correspond to the three aspects of Christian soteriology of justification, sanctification, and glorification.

The second aspect of Kantian moral faith, pertaining to the very rationality or rational stability of morality, requires for its resolution ultimate correspondence between virtue and happiness. This has been a recurring issue of discussion throughout the history of ethics. In Sidgwick's iteration of this old tension, he cashed it out in terms of the dualism of practical reason, concluding that, on rare occasions of radical perceived disconnect between the deliverances of morality and those of self-interest, rationality equally sanctions either the altruistic path or the self-interested one. Because he thought that there is insufficient evidence for the invariable coincidence of rational self-interest and altruism, Sidgwick considered both options to be equally legitimate. But he also discerned that this represented a fundamental challenge to the ethical enterprise, a reason to think that it lacks rational stability. The only solution he imagined on offer was a theistic one—namely, a loving and providential God who would ensure that the holy are ultimately also the happy, that virtue and self-interest always ultimately cohere and coincide. But his aversion to a theistic solution dissuaded him from taking this approach, even if it did promise to salvage the full rationality of morality. Once more, though, whereas theism holds out such hope, Platonism has nothing analogous to offer on this score.

Moral Authority

Fifth, consider moral obligations robustly construed and their authority binding. Here a study of contrasts is in order between theism and Platonism.

Comparative Strengths of Theism

Consider divine command theory's account of moral duties. This is where DCT's explanatory superiority to Wielenberg's theory becomes most evident. For even if every moral theory must ultimately stop explanation somewhere, such a theory may still enjoy the advantages of a more plausible explanatory ultimate and of greater explanatory depth than its rivals.

As we have seen, obligations and prohibitions are typically grounded in imperatives issued by a qualified authority. As the paradigmatic good, God certainly fills that role. For as the supreme good (*summum bonum*), God is eminently qualified to issue imperatives that constitute for us our moral duties. *A morally and metaphysically perfect being who is personal arguably provides the best—indeed, best possible—account of authority in the ineliminably personalist arena of morality*. Whatever the merits of the particular variant of deontic ethics that is DCT, this broader point seems, to us at least, eminently clear.

Moreover, explaining our moral obligations as arising from divine commands exhibits explanatory depth, even if the theist, in response to the question, "Why are we obligated to obey God's commands?," finally says, "Every theory must start somewhere, and my starting point is that obligations are constituted by imperatives issued by a qualified authority. As the ultimate good itself, and the greatest possible being, God is qualified to issue moral imperatives."

Moreover, why think that the divine command theorist must stop explanation in brute facts? In answer to the question, "Why are we obligated to obey God's commands?," the most straightforward answer is, "Because God commands us to!" At first blush such an answer might seem to launch us on an infinite regress, for now the objector will demand, "Why are we obligated to obey God's command to obey his commands?" This is the prior obligations objection considered earlier in the book. But there is no need to embark on such a regress. Rather, DCT's definition of moral

obligation should be understood as an impredicative definition, one that includes itself.

It might be feared that impredicative definitions lead inevitably to paradox. But, in fact, impredicative definitions are not inherently paradoxical. One has to construct the situation in a particular way in order to generate a paradox. One thinks of Russell's illustration of the village barber who only shaves everyone who does not shave himself, which is inherently paradoxical, or the set of all sets that are not members of themselves, which brought down naive set theory. By contrast, the set of all things mentioned in this book is itself mentioned in this book. No paradox there! So suppose God has issued to us the following command: "Obey everything I command you!" If we ask why we should obey that command, the answer lies not in a further command (leading to an infinite regress) but in the command itself. The command to obey everything God has commanded us is one of the things God has commanded us to do. So if God's commands constitute our moral obligations, we are obligated to do everything God has commanded us, including obeying his command to do everything he has commanded us.

There is nothing objectionably circular about saying that we are obligated to do everything that God commands us—including that command. Neither is such self-referentiality or impredicativity inherently paradoxical. On the contrary, such a moral theory exhibits explanatory depth as well as a plausible explanatory ultimate.

Comparative Weaknesses of Platonism

Godless normative realism's account of objective moral duties, in stark contrast, is seriously flawed. Here are five major problems with it: First, GNR implausibly implies that if you have decisive moral reasons for doing something, you are obligated to do it. On Wielenberg's view, moral obligations are constituted by having decisive moral reasons for doing some action. For example, if I'm trying to decide whether to steal someone's pocketbook, I examine the moral value of alternative actions and see that I have decisive moral reasons for not stealing the pocketbook. Therefore, I ought not to steal it.

Wielenberg's normative account seems to get the explanatory order exactly backward. It is not the case that we are obligated to do something because we have moral reasons to do it; rather, our being obligated to do something provides us a moral reason to do it. That is why on DCT our moral obligations are unconditional or categorical. Whereas on normative theories like Wielenberg's our moral duties will depend on our interest in moral matters, on DCT God's commands give us an unconditional obligation to do something whether we care about morality or not.

In holding that our moral obligations arise from our having decisive moral reasons to do something, GNR fails to provide unconditional moral obligations, which a robust moral theory ought to do. Your having decisive moral reasons to do an act implies at most that *if* you want to act morally, then that is the act you ought to do. In other words, the obligation to do the act is only conditional, not unconditional. A robust moral theory ought to provide a basis for unconditional moral obligations, which Wielenberg's view does not. By contrast a divine command provides a categorical obligation to perform some act.

Moreover, Wielenberg's view is incompatible with morally supererogatory acts, like sacrificing one's life for another, for even though such an act is supremely good, it is above and beyond the call of duty. Wielenberg's view seems to imply that we are always obligated to do the best thing, whereas in some cases we are obligated at most to do a good thing, not the best thing. Even if it were morally better, for example, for you to become a doctor rather than an engineer, you're not morally obligated to become a doctor, for both are good moral choices.

Second, GNR subverts the objectivity of moral duties by undermining freedom of the will. Wielenberg endorses what he calls "the causal closure of the physical."[27] That implies that our mental states are causally effete. The mind has no effect on the body. The only causality is from physical brain states to mental states. Physical brain states are, in turn, caused exclusively by prior physical states. Thus, mental states are causally impotent states that just float along, as it were, on brain states. They do and effect nothing. In that case, everything we think and do is causally determined by prior physical states.[28] You are an electrochemical machine, and machines have no moral obligations to do anything.

Your body is not obligated to do anything. What about your self, your mind? On Wielenberg's view the self is just a succession of discrete mental states; there is no enduring subject that persists from one moment to another. Literally no one can be held morally accountable for prior acts. Moral praise and blame are impossible since there is no enduring moral agent. Your perception of yourself as a moral agent and your sense of moral duties and accountability are illusions of human consciousness. Thus, the objectivity of moral duties, along with moral agency and moral accountability, is undone by GNR.

Third, one of the recurring deficiencies of Plato's theory rears its head once more: the lack of a person who can issue moral imperatives as an expression of the ultimate good. Platonism posits an objective good, all right, but lacks any basis for objective moral duties because the good is an impersonal, abstract object. Moral obligations and prohibitions arise from imperatives issued by a qualified authority. But on Platonism, there is no one to issue such imperatives.

Fourth, the nature of moral duty or obligation seems incompatible with nontheistic moral Platonism. Let us suppose for the sake of argument that moral values do exist in an atheistic world. Suppose that values like mercy, justice, love, forbearance, and the like just exist. How does that result in any moral obligations for us? Why would we have a moral duty, say, to be merciful? Who or what lays such an obligation on me? On this view moral vices such as greed, hatred, and selfishness also presumably exist as abstract objects too. Why are we obligated to align our life with one set of these abstractly existing objects rather than any other?

Fifth, it seems improbable that just that sort of creature would emerge from the blind evolutionary process who corresponds to the abstractly existing realm of moral values. This seems to be an incredible coincidence when one thinks about it. It is almost as though the moral realm knew that we were coming. As William Sorley saw, it is far more plausible to regard both the natural realm and the moral realm as under the hegemony of a divine Creator and Lawgiver than to think that these two entirely independent orders of reality just happened to mesh.

In sum, DCT, in grounding moral obligations and prohibitions in divine commands, offers a more plausible and adequate explanation of moral duties and authority than does GNR.

Human Dignity

Sixth, theism arguably provides the better account of human dignity, the sort of *intrinsic value* of which Immanuel Kant wrote, as distinguished from *mere price*. There's an important cluster of interrelated notions here: basic human rights, intrinsic human value, human dignity, essential human equality, and the like. Earlier in the book we talked about Kant's emphasis on the inherent dignity of each person, something that should be regarded as an unconditioned and incomparable worth that deserves our reverence. It's widely accepted that among patristic and medieval writings, modern political texts on natural law and right, the humanism of the Renaissance, and Enlightenment ideas about basic human rights can be found a vision of the individual as reflecting the *imago Dei*.

Of course, such historical facts don't establish biblical teachings about human persons being made in God's image as the only possible account of human dignity and worth. Nor do such facts entail the truth of the doctrine, but they do establish a historical pedigree to the enduring idea that people of all stripes, throughout the world and history, possess inherent dignity and value, not a mere price. We quoted an array of thinkers who chronicled how the biblical principle of the *imago Dei* translated historically into salutary reforms in the political and social arena and functioned centrally in the imagination of those who advanced the cause of various humanistic agendas. We need not argue that there is no secular counterpart that is as effective at inculcating such widespread commitments to socializing reforms, but we think our secular interlocutors are hard-pressed to find one.

On occasion mention is made of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which accorded pride of place to human dignity as the foundation for such rights without any pretense of grounding them in a transcendent source or Christian anthropology. It is true, moreover, that the larger commission responsible for drafting the document was little concerned about such underlying foundations. Interestingly, though, it was different with the four key drafters. One was a member of the Greek Orthodox Church and an ardent Thomist, another a devout and learned Christian, and the other two quite knowledgeable about the Western religious traditions. All were cognizant of the historical role played by the theological vision of human beings as persons imbued with inalienable

dignity by a transcendent God. But they happened to think the epistemology of the matter was clear and intuitive enough that the metaphysics need not be articulated. Even those not steeped in the undergirding theology can still apprehend and appreciate the deep and mysterious value of persons, they thought, enabling the document to appeal to those from a wide array of perspectives.

Often we think this is a wise course, and we celebrate Wielenberg's recognition of the value of persons. This is no small agreement, and we appreciate his realist commitments on this matter and many others. We need not argue that his efforts to explain it hold no purchase, even if we wish to suggest that secular accounts seem inadequate to the task of upholding the sacredness of human beings and the inherent dignity of people, abled and disabled. Nicholas Wolterstorff argues at length that capacity-based and, more broadly, various atheistic accounts of human dignity fail to include those persons who are incapable of rational reflection or agency.[29] Wolterstorff's theistic account of human dignity makes appeal to God's love for all human persons, which is certainly an interesting account worth careful consideration. Our favored theistic account draws on the traditional doctrine that human beings have been made in God's image. As Robert Adams maintains, things have value insofar as they resemble God, the highest good. As God's image is an ontological feature of all human persons, it is less tied to anything volitional and so less susceptible to Euthyphro-styled objections.[30]

Wielenberg does not consider human value one of the brute facts to which he makes appeal. He recognizes, rightly we think, that a deeper metaphysical story is needed to account for it, even if we all have the epistemic ability to discern its truth.[31] Readers can decide for themselves whether a secular story can do the job as well as something like our having been made in God's image, but we're inclined to think this robust feature of a theological account provides a decided advantage explanatorily. The personalist nature of theism again seems to be of central importance; on our view, the value of personhood is found in the fact that the metaphysically, axiologically, and explanatorily ultimate Being is personal.[32] We will end this section with these words from David Bentley Hart:

> To look on the child whom our ancient ancestors would have seen as somehow unwholesome or as a worthless burden, and would have abandoned to fate, and to see in him or her instead a person worthy of all affection—resplendent with divine glory, ominous with an absolute demand upon our consciences, evoking our love and our reverence—is to be set free from mere elemental existence, and from those natural inclinations that pre-Christian persons took to be the very definition of reality.
>
> And only someone profoundly ignorant of history and of native human inclinations could doubt that it is only a consequence of the revolutionary force of Christianity within our history, within the very heart of our shared nature, that any of us can experience this freedom. We deceive ourselves also, however, if we doubt how very fragile this vision of things truly is: how elusive this truth that only charity can know, how easily forgotten this mystery that only charity can penetrate.[33]

Cumulative Case

By way of wrapping up our discussion, we appeal to the idea of a cumulative case argument once more. What we have seen here in this final chapter is an array of considerations that individually suggest that theism has an explanatory edge over Platonism, perhaps even a significant one. Although we won't endeavor to quantify the result, we do wish to suggest that the case for theism is stronger than merely the individual items delineated here. For in the final analysis, we can and should combine these evidential considerations into a cumulative case in favor of theism over Platonism. Their combined strength, in particular, we submit, offers principled reasons for thinking that theism can win this friendly debate. We say this while remembering, once more, the limitations in what we were able to do here and the many points of agreement we share with our Platonist interlocutors.

We have argued that theism wins over Platonism in the following six respects: (1) personalist dimensions, (2) explanatory depth, (3) moral knowledge, (4) both aspects of Kantian moral faith, (5) moral authority, and (6) human dignity. And when we add the pieces together into a cumulative argument, the strength of the case for theism over Platonism becomes yet stronger. The personal nature of theism, the suitability of God as the explanatory ultimate of morality, the power of a theistic solution to debunking concerns, the availability of divine grace to meet our deepest existential moral needs, a strong account of moral authority and responsibility, and a sturdy and time-tested grounding for the dignity and

worth of human persons, basic human rights, and essential human equality collectively, to our thinking, render Anselmian theism the account preferable to atheistic moral Platonism.

1 Wielenberg's approach, he thinks, is consistent with theism, but it's an effort to account for strong moral realism without appeal to theism. Erik J. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism* (Oxford University Press, 2014). This is a reminder that there's precedent for this; others, like Keith Yandell, have been theists who have endorsed variants of Platonism. We tend instead toward theistic metaethics, thinking it better equipped to handle the moral data. See Keith E. Yandell, "God and Propositions," in *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects* (Bloomsbury, 2014), 219.

2 George Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 2nd ed., ed. Louis P. Pojman (Wadsworth, 1995).

3 This means that our present goal is limited to less than a full-fledged abductive account. Having narrowed the operative options at this point to theism and Platonism, we offer several reasons to think that theism is the better alternative. A full abductive account would need to show that theism is the best option from among the full range of alternatives. Although we have hinted at such a case, space constraints preclude our laying out this full case.

4 Thanks to Steve Parrish for discussion on this score.

5 Conceptually distinct arguments are at play here, which complement one another quite well: An impersonal reality cannot exhibit intentionality, and value requires personhood.

6 Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 55.

7 We resonate with the words of ethicist Shelly Kagan (*The Limits of Morality* [Clarendon, 1989], 13):

> An adequate justification for a set of principles requires an *explanation* of those principles—an explanation of why exactly these goals, restrictions, and so on, should be given weight,

> and not others. Short of this, the principles will not be free of the taint of arbitrariness which led us to move beyond our . . . *ad hoc* shopping lists. . . . Unless we can offer a coherent explanation of our principles (or show that they need no further justification), we cannot consider them justified, and we may have reason to reject them. . . . This need for explanation in moral theory cannot be overemphasized.

8 Kagan, *Limits of Morality*, 13.

9 Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 1–39.

10 "I take it that a fundamental category of existing thing is the category of *states of affairs*. States of affairs are necessarily existing abstract entities that obtain or fail to obtain" (Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 36; cf. 45–46). But Wielenberg often speaks of properties instead of states of affairs and sometimes speaks of states of affairs as though they were propositions (36, 46). He is not consistent in treating states of affairs (and properties) as abstract objects, since he thinks that nonmoral states of affairs cause moral states of affairs to be instantiated. He then seems to be thinking of the physical instances of abstract nonmoral states of affairs; for example, "moral rightness supervenes on truth telling because being an instance of truth telling *makes* actions right" (67).

11 Peter van Inwagen, "A Theory of Properties," in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, ed. Dean Zimmerman (Clarendon, 2004), 1:110–11.

12 Van Inwagen, "Theory of Properties," 107.

13 Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 4, 36–38.

14 As Robert Adams says, "If God is the Good itself, then the Good is not an abstract object but a concrete (though not a physical) individual" (*Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* [Oxford University Press, 1999], 43). If one does want to be a Platonist, it is far more plausible to be a theist, since then putative abstract objects can be seen as either created by God or as ideas in God's mind, thus giving us a unified view of reality. See the suggestion by C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 154, drawing on the work of George Mavrodes.

15 Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 18.

16 Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 13, 16, 56.

17 A term coined by Terence Horgan, "From Supervenience to Superdupervenience: Meeting the Demands of a Material World," *Mind* 102 (1993): 577.

18 Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 18–19.

19 Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 37–38.

20 Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 20.

21 Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 20.

22 Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 37–38.

23 Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 344–45.

24 Andrew Moon, "Debunking Morality: Lessons from the EAAN Literature," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 98, no. 51 (2017): 208–26; "Global Debunking Arguments," in *Evolutionary Debunking Arguments: Ethics, Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Mathematics, Metaphysics, and Epistemology*, ed. Diego E. Machuca (Routledge, 2023), 304–32.

25 To illustrate, suppose you learn that your dinner was tainted with a certain drug that distorts the color vision of 95 percent of the people who ingest it. You would now have a defeater for the reliability of your color vision. It would be futile to appeal to your clear perception of colors of objects around you, for that perception has already been defeated. However, suppose that before dinner a scientific expert had informed you on the basis of a blood test that you are among the 5 percent who are immune to the drug. In this case the would-be defeater never becomes a defeater in the first place. It is deflected by what you already believe. The challenge for the evolutionary naturalist is to come up with some sort of deflector of the defeater of the reliability of his cognitive faculties.

26 Richard Swinburne is known for expressing skepticism about the moral argument for God. Though, by his own admission he actually thinks the epistemic variant of the moral argument does constitute a C-inductive argument for God's existence, if only by a little. "You are right that I am sympathetic to a version of an argument from our knowledge of morality to the existence of God, but only one which by itself would add a fairly small amount to the probability of God." Richard Swinburne in personal correspondence to David Baggett, November 25, 2023.

The bone of our contention with Swinburne about the efficacy of the other variants of the moral argument is not the necessity of certain moral truths but rather Swinburne's tacit assumption that necessary truths cannot stand to one another in relations of explanatory priority. Why should we accept that assumption? Not only do we see no reason to think that assumption true, but it strikes us as obviously false.

For example, the axioms of Peano arithmetic are explanatorily prior to "2 + 2 = 4," as are the axioms of Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory to the theorems thereof. To give an example from metaphysics, the fact that "No event precedes itself" is necessarily true because it is necessarily true that "Temporal becoming is an objective and essential feature of time." To give a theological example, "States of consciousness exist" is necessarily true, since "God exists" is necessarily true. That is to say, the fact that a personal, metaphysically necessary being like God exists explains why it is necessarily true that states of consciousness exist. We regard as quite implausible the suggestion that the relation of explanatory priority in such cases is symmetric. It would be inept to maintain, for example, that the reason it is necessarily true that God exists is because, necessarily, states of consciousness exist.

27 Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 15.

28 As Jaegwon Kim has shown, there would be on physicalism neither need nor room for mental states to exercise causality. See Jaegwon Kim, *Mind in a Physical World* (MIT Press, 1998), 37–47; *Physicalism, or Something Near Enough* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 13–22; *Philosophy of Mind*, 3rd ed. (Westview, 2011), 214–20. We're indebted to J. P. Moreland for these references.

29 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 325–40.

30 This is not to suggest that Wolterstorff's account faces insuperable objections in this regard, but here's an example of such a criticism: Jordan Wessling, "A Dilemma for Wolterstorff's Theistic Grounding of Human Dignity and Rights," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2014): 277–95.

31 Wielenberg tries his hand at the task here: "Three Sources of Human Dignity," in *The Inherence of Human Dignity*, ed. Angus J. L. Menuge and Barry W. Bussey (Anthem, 2021). We harbor doubts that his account using symbolism can undergird dignity for the nonabled, a discussion for another day.

32 Mark Linville, "The Moral Argument," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Blackwell, 2009), 391–448.

33 David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (Yale University Press, 2009), 213–14.

Conclusion

Recall how the logical dialectic of the book proceeded. In part 1, we began with a cursory account of the rich, fertile history of the moral argument. Along the way we noted that a full-fledged book on contemporary variants of the moral argument is needed; we may try our hand at such a volume someday. A historical survey made clear a few interesting points. First, few of the luminaries acted as if their case could be made in such a compelling way that everyone must be convinced on pain of insincerity, irrationality, stupidity, or obstinacy. They believed in following evidence, and they were convinced that arguments play their role; but they paid their opponents the respect of allowing them their mental freedom to arrive at their own conclusions. Second, note the expansive epistemology, wide empiricism, and broad theories of rationality of so many of these historical figures. Few were narrow logic choppers or abstemious empiricists; they were open to the deliverances of relations, literature, poetry, emotions, and aesthetics.

Part 2 provided a short primer in metaethics, offering critiques of error theory, expressivism, and constructivism as well as offering several positive arguments in favor of moral realism. Our aspiration was to survey the lay of the land while recognizing the limitations that this imposes. We thought it eminently worth doing it this way so as not to miss the forest for the trees, in order to make clear some of the rich array of disparate and intersecting evidential considerations in favor of moral realism. The arguments encompass the logic, language, and phenomenology of morality, and plenty more besides. It is true to the way the human mind works to gesture at a panoply of operative reasons, the collective power of which is enough to culminate in a conviction worthy of allegiance and tenacity.

On that foundation, we offered an integrated, cumulative-case, five-part moral argument of our own in part 3. The argument canvassed objective moral values and inherent human dignity, objective moral duties, moral

knowledge, an argument from grace, and an argument from providence. The divine loom weaves together the warp of moral facts with the weft of moral knowledge and, by turns, the taut threads of moral faith. To vary the metaphor, in the same way that a labyrinthine maze of jumbled metal filings suddenly stands in symmetrical formation in response to the pull of a magnet, likewise the right organizing story pulls all the moral pieces of evidence into alignment and allows a striking pattern to emerge.

Part 4 brought our discussion to a close by primarily contrasting atheistic Platonism with a theistic account of various moral phenomena. There we argued that theism indeed provides the right organizing story, more so than Platonism for several reasons, despite the wide swath of agreements Platonism and theism share.

Since most of what we have had to say in the book has pertained to theism generally, here in the conclusion we thought we would briefly canvass some ways in which the moral argument can be deployed as an argument not just for God per se but for Christianity particularly. The claim is not that one can, by moral apologetics alone, somehow *deduce* all the aspects of special revelation contained in Christianity but rather that, in light of Christianity having been revealed, moral arguments for God's existence point quite naturally in its direction.

The following list offers seven reasons to think this may be so. This discussion is far from exhaustive and is simply meant to be suggestive for further investigation.

Christological

The final chapter of H. P. Owen's *Moral Argument for Christian Theism* points to New Testament teachings on goodness, duty, and beatitude that can both positively and negatively lead the mind to belief in the God of Christianity.[1] John Henry Newman thought that special revelation performs a sort of ampliative function in taking the deliverances of general revelation and focusing them into more fine-grained form—namely, of Christ.[2] One of the great virtues of moral arguments for God's existence is that they point not just to the existence of God but to a God of a particular nature: a God who is morally perfect—not just perfectly holy but also perfectly loving.

A. C. Ewing once said that the source of the moral law is morally perfect.[3] Such a notion is described in various ways: omnibenevolent, impeccable, essentially good, and the like. What does it look like when omnibenevolence takes on human form? The self-giving life of Jesus is a powerful answer and impeccable moral exemplar for us to emulate. *Moral apologetics arguably works best when it is christological*.

Trinitarian

To conceive of God as essentially and perfectly loving requires some sort of account. The right account, again, is not the sort of idea that we are able to generate on our own; we depend on special revelation to tell us what it is. But Christianity has provided us with an account of the divine nature that is trinitarian in nature—we cannot deduce it, but we can recognize its truth once we see it. C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, "All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that 'God is love.' But they seem not to notice that the words 'God is love' have no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love."[4] The recent wonderful book *Divine Love Theory* by Adam Johnson makes this connection explicit.[5] *Moral apologetics works best when it is trinitarian.*

Soteriological

Under the performative or transformational variant of the moral argument can fit our need for not just transformation but forgiveness. Most all of us have on occasion shuddered and been riddled with guilt for having fallen short of a moral standard of which we can hardly help but be aware. In a paper on moral arguments for God, Robert Adams once wrote that standard fare in such philosophical discussions are ontological or epistemic arguments, but then he added, "I am keenly aware that they form only part of the total moral case for theistic belief. Theistic conceptions of guilt and forgiveness, for example, . . . may well have theoretical and practical moral

advantages at least as compelling as any that we have discussed."[6] The moral argument, functioning as a prelude to the gospel, leaves many with a deep felt need for forgiveness for moral failures. If that is a central phenomenological question the moral argument raises, the death and resurrection of Jesus is the historical and theological answer Christianity provides. As Lewis once said, Christians offer an explanation of how we got into our present state of both hating goodness and loving it—and how we hope that our worst moments do not define us. Moral apologetics reminds us of our need for forgiveness; a test of the strength of a worldview is its ability to provide it. The good news of Christianity is that forgiveness is available. *Moral apologetics works best when it answers to our deepest moral existential needs for deliverance from guilt and shame.*

Individually Transformational

Historically, Christianity has a demonstrated track record of reaching people of every race and ethnicity and socioeconomic background and of radically transforming their lives. In *They Found the Secret*, a book chronicling the spiritual lives of various Christian saints, can be found this description: "Out of discouragement and defeat they have come into victory. Out of weakness and weariness they have been made strong. Out of ineffectiveness and apparent uselessness they have become efficient and enthusiastic. The pattern seems to be self-centeredness, self-effort, increasing inner dissatisfaction and outer discouragement, a temptation to give it all up because there is no better way, and then finding the Spirit of God to be their strength, their guide, their confidence and companion—in a word, their life."[7] This isn't Pollyannaish. We can be not only forgiven our sins but delivered from sin itself. We can be changed, and ultimately we will be entirely transformed; the very power that raised Jesus from the dead can be at work within us to change us from within, wholly and completely. *Moral apologetics works best when it is individually transformational*—indeed, A. E. Taylor preferred language of *transfiguration*.[8]

Culturally Transformational

Paul Copan speaks of a historical aspect of moral apologetics: the historical role played by Christ and his devoted followers to promote social justice. Morality demands deep cultural transformation, too, including hard work to battle systemic evils. Copan cites specific cultural developments that can be shown to have flowed from the Jewish-Christian worldview, leading to societies that are "progress-prone rather than progress-resistant," including such signs of progress as the founding of modern science, poverty-diminishing free markets, equal rights for all before the law, religious liberty, women's suffrage, human rights initiatives, and the abolition of slavery, widow-burning, and foot-binding.[9]

Jacques Derrida wrote that the cornerstone of international law is the sacredness of one's neighbor.[10] Today there is a growing opinion among Chinese social scientists that the Christian idea of transcendence was the historic basis for the concepts of human rights and equality. Atheist Richard Rorty admitted that societies throughout history have come up with various ways to exclude certain groups from the human family by calling them "pseudohuman" and that, by contrast, Christianity gave rise to the concept of universal rights, derived from the conviction that all human beings are created in the image of God.[11] *Moral apologetics works best when it is culturally transformational*.

Eschatological

The moral argument and the problem of evil are locked in a zero-sum game. One will win, and one will lose. Christianity offers principled reason to think that the glory to come will not just *outweigh* but definitely *defeat* the worst evils of this world. Christian philosopher Marilyn McCord Adams writes, "If Divine Goodness is infinite, if intimate relation to It is thus incommensurably good for created persons, then we have identified a good big enough to defeat horrors in every case."[12] *Moral apologetics works best when it is eschatological*.

Anthropological

Christianity gives compelling reasons to think that every person possesses infinite dignity and value—a motif found in the likes of Linville, Farrer, and Evans. To be loved by God, the very archetype of all goodness—each of us differently, but all of us infinitely—and to have been made a person in his image is to possess greater worth than we can begin to imagine. And humanity is not just valuable in the aggregate, according to Christianity. Rather, each person is unique, each is loved by God, and each is someone for whom Jesus suffered, died, and was raised. And in the book of Revelation, for all who lay down their arms and allow themselves to be vanquished by the overtures of God's perfect love, a white stone will reveal a unique name for each one of them—marking their distinctive relationship with God and vocation in him (Rev. 2:17). *Moral apologetics works best when it is universal—without neglecting the personal*.

1 H. P. Owen, *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism* (George Allen & Unwin, 1965).

2 Such a notion is a central and recurring motif of Newman's theological masterpiece, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London, 1845), where he explained how the meaning of an idea, in this case Christian theology, can, while maintaining its essential integrity, expand over time without undergoing corruption. On Newman's epistemology, see *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870; repr., University of Notre Dame Press, 1979).

3 A. C. Ewing, *Value and Reality: The Philosophical Case for Theism* (George Allen & Unwin, 1973), 204.

4 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 160–61.

5 Adam Johnson, *Divine Love Theory* (Kregel, 2023). Steve Parrish's yet-to-be-published *The Nature of Moral Necessity* powerfully elucidates an application of several of Johnson's trinitarian ideas to the arena of theistic ethics and moral apologetics.

6 Robert Adams, "Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief," in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Delaney (University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 116–40.

[7] V. Raymond Edman, *They Found the Secret* (Zondervan, 1984), 11.

[8] *Faith of a Moralist* (Macmillan, 1930), 209.

[9] See Paul Copan, "Reinforcing the Moral Argument: Appealing to the Historical Impact of the Christian Faith," paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, November 19–21, 2014, San Diego.

[10] See Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (Penguin, 2010), 166–67.

[11] Richard Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," in *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993*, ed. Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (Basic Books, 1993).

[12] Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell University Press, 1999), 82–83.

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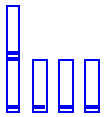
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